

keep the water warm

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/6141769) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/6141769>.

Rating:

[Explicit](#)

Archive Warnings:

[Rape/Non-Con](#), [Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings](#)

Category:

[M/M](#)

Fandom:

[방탄소년단](#) | [Bangtan Boys](#) | [BTS](#)

Relationships:

[Jeon Jungkook/Kim Taehyung](#) | [V](#), [Jung Hoseok](#) | [J-Hope/Min Yoongi](#) | [Suga/Park Jimin](#)

Characters:

[Jeon Jungkook](#), [Kim Taehyung](#) | [V](#), [Park Jimin \(BTS\)](#), [Kim Namjoon](#) | [Rap Monster](#), [Min Yoongi](#) | [Suga](#), [Jung Hoseok](#) | [J-Hope](#), [Kim Seokjin](#) | [Jin](#)

Additional Tags:

[Stepsiblings](#), [Alternate Universe - College/University](#), [Smut](#), [Unresolved Sexual Tension](#), [Family Issues](#), [Pining](#), [Emotional Constipation](#), [Slow Burn](#), [Background Yoonminseok](#), [Rimming](#), [Taekook switch](#), [Hate to Love](#), [Enemies to Friends to Lovers](#), [Barebacking](#), [Attempted Sexual Assault](#), [Character Development](#), [Wall Sex](#), [Vibrators](#), [Implied/Referenced Homophobia](#)

Language:

[English](#)

Series:

Part 1 of [stepsiblings](#)

Collections:

[BTS Fanfiction Archive](#), [20k + finished fics](#), [Stories I Have Finished](#)

Stats:

Published: 2016-03-01 Completed: 2018-02-08 Words: 60,058
Chapters: 13/13

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by [sassyneki](#)

Summary

“Get the fuck out of this room, Kim Taehyung.”

The last thing Taehyung expected this summer was to meet his new family, but as with all things, he's willing to give it a shot. He's willing to try. Too bad his new stepbrother doesn't feel the same way.

summer 2015, i

The first time Taehyung meets Jeongguk, the sun is just beginning to dip beneath the horizon.

It sets slowly, reluctantly, like a lover not wanting to leave. Light beams through Taehyung's worn curtains and through his shitty, sheer Spirited Away bedspread and through his shut eyelids, and the moment that flash of red hits his vision, he groans loudly, rolling over and burying his face into the pillow, fingers digging into the pillowcase.

"Taehyung, come down!" his father calls. "They're here!"

With a jolt, he sits up straight. *Holy fucking shit.* They're actually here. He's actually going to meet them.

When he first received the call in between finishing up his last assignment for the year and trying to download a bootleg version of Photoshop, he had no idea what to think. His dad had phoned him and spoken in the smallest of voices, practically whispered through the phone, and all he managed to catch were light gasps of air before he hung it on impulse. The phone dropped onto the floor in a loud, dramatic clatter, almost as if in slow motion, as his hand remained frozen in place, the imprint of what had just happened hanging in the air.

But the words lingered in his head. *New family. Brilliant woman. A son your age.* He caught nothing but glimpses of a future that he couldn't bring himself to anticipate, not after two years of tucking away the memory of a cancer-stricken mother into the corners of his mind.

And now, two weeks later, he likes to think his heart has settled. That his anxious mind has somehow managed to calm down.

This is good, isn't it? A new start with a new family. A new woman that his father loves. A new brother.

"I'm coming!" he shouts. It takes effort to get off the bed. The touch is warm and familiar, even if the mattress has sunken in from years of misuse. But he scrambles off the bed anyway, throwing on the most decent clothes that he owns—not very decent by any standards, unfortunately, not unless you count giant t-shirts and sweatpants as haute couture—and hurriedly dashing downstairs.

He's familiar with his home. Really, he is. His entire childhood is inscribed into these walls, carved out in invisible ink and hazy memories. Yet as he scurries down the stairs, he still trips and lands face flat.

"Oh dear, are you alright?" an unfamiliar voice asks, lilting and smooth and clear.

He gets up and dusts non-existent dirt off his pants. Flashes a grin that has won over the hearts of many in this lifetime. Composes himself so that he doesn't look like an absolute fool.

"This is Yein and her son, Jeongguk," his father introduces.

She is a small woman, pin-straight hair pulled back as tight as it can go, and when they shake hands, he notices that her fingers are rough and worn. Manual labour, maybe, or from too many days of doing dishes that no one else wanted to touch. Thin lips that stretch into a kind smile as she nods her head and lets out a polite "Nice to meet you, Taehyung-ssi" in a voice much lower than he expected. Lower, steadier.

"You can call me Taehyung," he replies politely. Then he looks to the boy standing at her side.

Jeongguk towers over his mother but still stands an inch or two shorter than Taehyung. He leans his weight onto one foot, body almost veering backward and off to the side, feet pointing out and all ready to hightail it out of here, arms crossed tight across his chest. Even his hoodie is dirty and frayed at the edges, like he couldn't give a rat's ass about what he wears to his first meeting with his new family.

But when he looks up and the glint of setting sun coming through the window hits his face just right, Taehyung is struck with how good the boy looks. Remnants of baby fat sit on his cheekbones but he is growing out of it, perhaps not slowly or reluctantly, but surely, definitely. His jaw is strong and his nose is straight, his cupid's bow sits atop a sullen pout and his large eyes drill into Taehyung's own.

He tries to ignore the fact that no, that's not curiosity or wonder in those eyes—it's hostility.

"Greet him, don't be rude," Yein grits. The facade falls for a bit before her smile returns. She sighs. "Sorry, he's already in university but he's still a little brat."

"I'm not a brat," Jeongguk mutters, looking away and toward the door, "and I'm not little."

"Hi, my name is Kim Taehyung. It's nice to meet you," Taehyung greets. He plasters a wide smile on his face and pretends to not notice the exchange.

He folds his arms over his chest and stares at Taehyung. It's kind of (very) unnerving.

"Jeon Jeongguk."

Not even a greeting? He finds himself a little miffed, and responds by wrinkling his nose and raising his brows.

Just as he's about to say something so incredibly witty it's sure to win over even Jeon 'I Hate World' Jeongguk's heart, Taehyung's father comes out from the kitchen wearing a Pororo apron around his waist and carrying a casserole in his hands.

"Alright, who wants kimchi stew?"

The second-most thing Taehyung is proud of is his persistence. (It falls just a few points short of his self-proclaimed individuality and barely edges out his natural knack for witty puns.) And so, when Jeongguk spent the entirety of their first dinner as a family together in cold, unrelenting silence, refusing to budge even when Yein— *my mother* , he quickly corrects—stares him down with stern eyes, Taehyung is only very, very slightly discouraged.

Instead of backing off into a corner, Taehyung likes to charge head-first and hope for the best. And this is how he ends up outside Jeongguk's bedroom—a few hours ago, it had been their spare guest room, the one with the really nice television and shitty lighting—with a bag of chips in one hand and cola in the other.

It's dim and dark, their parents are off to the room doing god-knows-what (he really doesn't want to know). The floorboards creak under his weight with each step, he can barely see anything in this light, but here he is anyway, armed with a peace treaty of sorts and a will carved out of necessity. He knows this probably will not work—

Jeongguk already proved over dinner that he is a Rude Emo Boy who will not budge easily, still stuck in his teenage rebel phase—but Taehyung is willing to try anyway.

He knocks twice. When there's no answer, he calls out, "Jeongguk?" and when there is still no reply, he tucks the bag of chips under his arm and turns the knob and winces as the hinges creak loudly, in time with the door nudging open, just a crack.

"Jeonggukkie? Are you there?" he asks, softer this time, letting his vowels spill into the dark.

It takes a few moments for his eyes to adjust to the lack of lighting, and when he rights himself again, all he sees is Jeongguk lying face-up on the bed, staring up at the ceiling. Taehyung can see the light heaving of his chest with each inhale, each exhale, ribcage moving up and down in tandem with the whisper of wind against the window panes. He barely moves from his position when Taehyung tiptoes closer.

"Don't call me that," Jeongguk says, voice tight and hoarse. He pushes himself up onto his elbows, the sheets rustling beneath clenched fingers, and looks at Taehyung. "What do you want?"

Under the cover of the moonlight, Jeongguk looks a lot less intimidating, Taehyung thinks. The bags under his eyes are even more prominent, stark moonlight casting sharp shadows on the planes of his face, his knuckles are white even in the dark—his eyes, too, are still hostile, but it's wavering, about to give way to something else. And half-tucked under that blanket, all alone in the large bed—it just makes him look smaller. More vulnerable, more like a nineteen-year old instead of some rebel with a hardened heart.

"I was wondering," Taehyung starts, a little hesitant, "if you wanted to watch a movie."

The television really is very nice and it's a nice summer night and Taehyung wants to get off on the right foot with his new family, he really does. His father is happy and his new mother is nice and he wants to make this work.

"No," Jeongguk replies. His voice is still tight and hoarse, like someone's gotten hold of his throat and squeezed it till it could constrict no further. "Just leave, please."

"Are you sure?" Taehyung asks. He steps forward, slippers rough

against the floorboards. "I mean, I know this is tough for you and it is for me, too, but we gotta try—"

"Get the fuck out of this room, Kim Taehyung."

It's not a whisper. It's not a shout. It lies somewhere in between, but the anger brimming in those words and the look of complete hostility on Jeongguk's face is enough to make something twist in Taehyung's stomach. It takes only a few seconds before Taehyung turns tail and leaves and makes sure to shut the door quietly as he goes, Jeongguk's voice still ringing in his head.

A few days have passed, and each day, Taehyung tries. He really, really tries, but Jeongguk is as unresponsive as, he doesn't know, an oyster, or something. He tries making conversation at the dinner table but it ends up with him talking to himself while Jeongguk picks at his chicken, not even pretending to pay attention.

"Hey, Jeonggukkie, what university do you go to?" he asks. Their parents have retreated to their bedroom to do questionable things and it's just the two of them, a bowl of popcorn (shoved unceremoniously into their laps by his kind father) and Kingsman.

His stepbrother plunges his hand into the bowl of popcorn and munches loudly.

Taehyung grits his teeth. He's patient, he really is. In fact, Jimin even called him a saint once, albeit after ten shots of vodka and a bout of bad (but brilliant) decisions. Point is—he's a friendly, patient and nice person and he has done nothing to warrant this sort of shitty treatment.

But because he's nice, he puts up with it. For his father, for his family, for himself.

"I go to Yonsei," he continues. *Happy voice, Taehyung, use your happy voice.* "Majoring in Economics. I'm pretty good at it but it's not something I really love, you know? But Dad wants me to go into finance and I don't really mind, since it's good money."

"Same," Jeongguk says, low and soft enough that Taehyung has to

blink to make sure he isn't hallucinating. "Chemistry major."

"Oh, that's cool! Science majors are always so busy. My friend, Park Jimin—maybe you've seen him around? Small, red hair and always hanging around a skinny pale blond-haired guy—is in Engineering and Dance and his schedule's always crazy." Taehyung reaches for some popcorn and accidentally grabs Jeongguk's fingers. He retracts his hand like it's been burnt and tries to fight off the blush on his cheeks. "I'm starting my last year soon, after this summer's over."

"Just finished my first." He angles his head to the side and Taehyung can't tell if his eyes are hooded or if he's simply squinting. But there's something else swimming in Jeongguk's eyes, dark and intense enough to make Taehyung gulp. "Yeah, busy."

Then Jeongguk places the still-full bowl of popcorn on the coffee table with a loud clang, gets up and heads upstairs without so much as a second glance.

That night is the most interaction they get. Taehyung is repeatedly brought aside by his anxious father, who prods at him to "spend more time with Jeonggukkie, he's a bit closed off". And he has to hold himself back from spitting out no, he's not just 'a bit' closed off, he's a fucking *clam* with no idea of the concept of opening up or, hell, even being polite.

He tries, though. He'll give himself that. He makes conversation at the dinner table and receives monosyllabic answers in response, passes the last chicken wing to Jeongguk only to have the boy pass it to his mother. In fact, the only reason why he even has Jeongguk's phone number is because his father forced them to exchange their contacts.

And his parents, they're too enamoured with each other to even care. He's happy for his father, really, and at first it isn't so bad. The knowledge that his father is happy—that is family is happy (well, kind of)—is enough to sustain him through dozens of bouts of awkward silences with Jeongguk.

Yet, as time passes on, as they sit through meal after meal without exchanging a single word and every one of his attempts to just become fucking *acquaintances* with his new stepbrother is knocked down with a single look, he feels frustration boiling over. Every time Jeongguk frowns at him and pulls back his upper lip and sneers—his pulse races, anger bubbles and his palm clenches into a tight fist, and it takes his entire being to hold back the words that are threatening to spill over.

He calms his nerves and pulls on the facade, pulls back the happy smile.

It's hard. It's hard to try, but Taehyung keeps trying and trying and trying. It gets harder and harder, but for now, it is still alright, and he will cling on to that shred of—positivity? hope? whatever one calls it—with everything that he has.

Summer comes and goes with each year, but it is always the same for Taehyung—he troops back home to Daegu and spends three months as the receptionist for the local vet, talking with customers like old friends (because they are), heads home everyday to dinner with his father and video-calls his asshole of a best friend at night.

Summer comes and goes with each year, and it is still the same for Taehyung—except this time, he has a mother to prepare dinner for him and his father and he has a stoic, rude stepbrother to deal with. Well, at least he still gets to work as a receptionist-cum-errand boy.

But, in all of his years spent as a summertime receptionist for Dr Park, he has never seen a little girl rush in with a puppy in her arms, tears pooling in her eyes.

“Please help him,” she pleads.

Her dress is pink and frilly and impeccable, but her face is swollen and red, long hair tied into pigtails yet caked with dirt at the ends. She holds the small golden retriever to her chest like a lifeline, even as a small, sad sound escapes the animal; its paw twitches, as if seeking comfort, but then falls back down again, dangling mid-air.

A few seconds later, someone else comes rushing in—an older lady, hair streaked with grey and crow's feet decorating the corners of her eyes. She kneels down and pries the dying puppy away from the girl and says something to Taehyung.

Her mouth is moving but—what is this? why can't he understand anything? why can't he *hear* anything?—and in his ears there's a violent drumming, something loud and indecipherable that drowns out all other noises and all that he sees is the life draining out of that innocent animal, the flame flickering out, that last whimper looping over and over again.

“Taehyung.”

He tries to move, oh fucking god he tries to move, he tries to reach out and grab at the dog so that he can bring it in and hopefully save it—but he *can't*. He can't move, he's rooted to the spot, his body won't do what it's supposed to.

“Taehyung!” Dr Kim calls out. “Are you alright?”

It finally registers that one of the nurses has ushered the young girl and her mother into the emergency room. The elderly vet is in front of Taehyung, brows knitted, mouth pulled into a small, concerned frown.

“Yeah, I'm okay,” Taehyung says, but just as the words come out of his throat, so does the slightest bit of bile—sharp and bitter on his tongue, the rancid taste spreading fast. “Just give me a second, please.”

He darts into the bathroom and keels into the tiles, bends over the porcelain throne and lets out the last of the previous night's dinner.

And as cathartic as some people claim vomiting might be (Park Jimin, said asshole of a best friend, of course), Taehyung highly doubts it. He heads home at night slightly light-headed and with an empty stomach, throat lined with the acidic burn of vomit, mind still reeling with images of a crying child and a frantic mother and a dying animal. His heart still beats a little fast, his nerves are a wreck.

“How was Dr Kim's today?” his father asks over dinner, chopsticks digging into his rice bowl. He turns to Taehyung's stepmother. “Taehyung here works at the local vet's over the summers.”

“That's really good, to get some experience,” she replies. A small smile graces her lips before she directs her gaze toward Jeongguk and frowns. “You should learn from your hyung.”

“I only do admin duties,” Taehyung interjects hurriedly the moment he sees Jeongguk's face darken over. He's not keen on playing mediator, especially not today, especially not when he still feels like the slightest breeze could knock him over. “Nothing much.”

He shoves spoonful after spoonful of rice into his mouth, swallows as he has been taught to, but his stomach quivers each time.

He can't take it any more. He stands up abruptly, interrupting the middle of a truly enlightening conversation about property prices in

Daegu.

“I’ll take my leave now, I’m not feeling very good,” he manages out, and leaves immediately.

The shower is the first place Taehyung heads to. It’s a safe haven of sorts—sterile, white, the feel of warm water rushing over his skin. And if he tries hard enough, he can imagine that it washes away everything that he has been through today and the day before and the day before that, that he can escape back into his head and not have to deal—not have to deal with everything bubbling over and spilling, leaving nothing but a huge mess.

The water is warm, and he wants to keep it that way, but it soon becomes hotter and hotter and he can’t find it in himself to adjust it. Steam rises from the bathroom tiles and swirls around him, sticks to his skin and hair and everywhere else.

All of a sudden, he is tired—he is so, so tired, and he finally lets the fatigue seep into his bones. Days of trying with his family and with Jeongguk have finally taken their toll, the dam let loose with a single, stupid catalyst of a dying animal—fuck, it’s so stupid, to be upset over a dying dog that he’s never met before, not even once—and he lets himself fall. His shoulders slump, he plasters his back onto the wet walls, he knocks his head back and the pain that ensues is sickeningly gratifying.

And this is how he remains. For minutes, hours, maybe even longer. He wants it to be longer. He wants it all to be over, sometimes. Sometimes.

But even as he loses himself, he is still acutely aware of reality. When he steps out of the shower and wraps a towel around his waist, the mirror is fogged over, his reflection now a blurry mess of tan skin and dark hair. He reaches a finger out and traces the words like he has always done (‘I am okay’) and heads back to his bedroom, eager for a night’s rest.

Just as he’s reaching into his closet door, one hand on the knob and the other on the towel around his waist, his door inches open.

“Taehyung-ssi? Are you inside?”

Hold on a second, is that Jeon fucking Jeongguk? Jeon ‘I don’t give a shit’ Jeongguk?

“Jeongguk?” Taehyung asks, whirling around, almost tripping over the towel before barely catching himself in time. “What are you doing here?”

Jeongguk’s eyes rake over Taehyung’s form, taking in his not-very-decent appearance, before something that look suspiciously like a blush spreads furiously across his cheeks and down his neck (and over his Adam’s apple and into the dip of his collarbones and into the collar of his shirt).

He steps back, hand tightening on the door knob.

“Uh,” Jeongguk says, face still crimson, “you might want to put on a shirt first. And some pants.”

“You can’t tell me what to do,” Taehyung says, nonplussed. Who knows how many times his friends have seen him naked after a night of drinking, and vice versa. “And I look very decent, thank you very much.”

“I—I was just wondering,” Jeongguk stutters. It’s strangely endearing, the way he ducks his head and doesn’t meet Taehyung’s eyes. “I was wondering if you’re alright.”

“Since when did you start caring about people other than yourself?”

Taehyung wants to slap himself the moment the words slip out, sharp and biting. The one time Jeongguk makes an effort, and he has to squash it with his lack of a thought filter.

“Well, sorry for trying to be nice,” Jeongguk snaps back, rolling his eyes. He runs his gaze over Taehyung’s half-naked form once again, but this time, instead of his face flooded with a bright crimson, a smirk pulls at his mouth and his eyes darken, and something twists in Taehyung’s stomach. “At least I care enough to be dressed properly.”

“If you’re trying to be nice, you’re not doing it very well,” Taehyung says. He grabs at a random t-shirt and puts it on, follows it up with a quick maneuver of boxers under the towel and over his legs. “There you go, all done. Now, what did you want to talk about again?”

Taehyung leans back against the wardrobe, fingers playing with the hem of his shirt, silently praying that his boxers don’t fall because he accidentally picked the too-large pair. A few meters away, Jeongguk stands, his stance strong and his gaze unwavering—yet, he is shivering ever so slightly, breath shaky even from a distance.

“I wanted to know if you’re okay.”

At first, it was alright. The first few seconds—they were alright, they were manageable. But the longer those words remained in his head, the longer they spilled over and seeped through, and the ensuing flood of emotions crashes over him like a tidal wave. It pulls at his stomach and his chest and his head and everywhere else, and everything is heavy, so heavy, something is clawing at his throat and pawing at his ribs and he can’t—

“You want to know if I’m okay?” Taehyung breathes. How he manages to even string a sentence, he can’t say. “I’m okay. I’m as okay as I can get, really.”

He meets Jeongguk’s stare head-on now, and that dark shred of *something* that had tugged at his lower stomach has no subsided, replaced with something more akin to uncertainty.

“It’s your fault, you know. You make it so hard. I just want to make this work—for my father, for Yein. For you, even. Even with your shit-ass attitude that I wish you’d left back wherever you came from. It’s emotionally exhausting. *You* are emotionally exhausting. I bet you make a shit lover.” He laughs half-heartedly. “You know what happened today? A dog died. A girl came in with her dog, and it died, and I became nauseous and I vomited and I don’t feel all that okay. Not at all, really.” Now his vision is blurry and his cheeks feel wet for no reason. “I don’t even know why, actually. But I’m as okay as I can get.”

Taehyung is reeling by the time he is done, bent over for no reason. Why hadn’t Jeongguk stopped him? He wishes Jeongguk had stopped him in the middle of whatever stupid rant that had been, his chest is tight and he can’t breathe properly and he wishes he could take back those words.

He stares at the ground. He reads the cracks in the floorboards and wishes he could see something, anything, from them, so that he can keep his brain occupied and away from the embarrassment that is about to hit.

Something grazes his shoulder. A light touch—feather light, almost hesitant—the feel of fingers pressing into his shoulder blade and thumb brushing across skin, the part where his shirt falls away to reveal the slightest bit of collarbone. And in that one touch, he thinks—he hopes, he prays—that he feels comfort.

He doesn't dare to look up. He doesn't say anything, and he knows neither will Jeongguk. Because for all that both of them are trying to do—what are they trying to do, even?—the unspoken, unresolved animosity still hangs between them and to cut it right now would be suicide, he thinks. Emotional suicide, and in the best case scenario, he would end up a huge ball of feelings that he will never be able to untangle.

A few moments pass in complete silence, only the sounds of Taehyung's heavy breaths filling the room, in tandem with each hesitant stroke of Jeongguk's thumb. This is as far as they will go, at least for now.

He looks up, now. He looks up and catches Jeongguk's gaze, and in it he sees something soft—that strange, strange look he'd seen, wavering beneath the hardened steel of their previous meetings, jaw clenching ever so slightly and eyes darker than usual, lips pink and pouty and slightly parted. The urge to reach out hits him like a truck—he wants to lift his hand up and out, run his fingers over Jeongguk's face and memorise them, see if they really feel sharp in some places and soft in others—but he has more self-restraint than that.

“Okay,” Taehyung whispers. He closes his eyes because he can't hold Jeongguk's gaze any longer, not when he feels the beginnings of *something* simmering in his stomach. “Okay.”

summer 2015, ii

The memory of that night leaves a bitter taste in Taehyung's mouth, and over the next few days he wants nothing more than to go back in time and stop himself from pulling such a stupid move. The one time that his stepbrother tries reaching out to him—instead of accepting the rare instance of kindness with open arms, he decides to keel and release all that pent-up... whatever, that'd been boiling over inside him.

If Jeongguk remembered any of it, though, he doesn't say anything. It's back to the cold, silent glances and terse replies.

Taehyung troops off to work every morning and Jeongguk goes somewhere, too, except Taehyung has no idea where and he's not willing to ask his parents, not when they're too busy talking to the wedding planner in cryptic messages. (He's *definitely* not willing to ask Jeongguk. God knows he'd probably get a smack to the arm.) And when Jeongguk comes back, walks through the front door like he owns the damn place, the smell of coffee and flour wafts through the air. It takes everything in Taehyung to not ask the younger boy where he's been.

And so the next few days pass like this: wake up, brush teeth, vehemently avoid eye contact with Jeongguk, grab a granola bar on the way out, work, return home for dinner and resume vehement avoidance of eye contact with Jeongguk. Rinse and repeat.

“Jiminie,” Taehyung whines into the phone, collapsing onto the bed. He's exhausted from a day of overly-concerned pet owners. “I wanna go back to school.”

“Never thought I'd ever hear that coming out from your mouth.” Jimin's laugh floats over from the other end of the call. “What happened?”

“I have a new stepbrother, and he fucking *sucks*.”

“Wait, what?” Jimin yelps. “Papa Kim got remarried? I don't see you for two weeks and now you have a new fetus in your family?”

“Eh, not 'fetus', exactly. He's two years younger than us, and he definitely doesn't look like a fetus,” Taehyung adds, recalling how Jeongguk's muscles had been prominent even under a deceptively

simple white t-shirt, thin as it was. “He goes to Yonsei too, actually. Back to the point: he sucks.”

“Dick?”

“You're not helping,” Taehyung groans.

“I'm being funny here—” then there's a long, pregnant pause in which Taehyung seriously reconsiders his choices in friends, when Jimin speaks up again, “Oh my god, you're so thirsty for him.”

“I am *not* thirsty for anyone,” Taehyung splutters. “What are you even saying?”

“You say he sucks, but you actually want him to suck your dick, don't you?”

“What the f—”

“You are so fucking thirsty.”

“You are not helping at all!”

Taehyung can feel his face growing red and hot even though it's, what, eleven at night and everyone else is in their rooms and no one can see him slowly drown in his own embarrassment.

It's not even *true*. Jeongguk's attractive, anyone with half an eye can see that, but he doesn't want to fuck Jeongguk. He doesn't want Jeongguk to fuck him. Really. The boy's Rude Emo Angst is no trade-off for whatever bomb sex game he might possess. This isn't some badly written yaoi hentai, this is his *life*, and Taehyung will damn well make sure he doesn't mess it up for himself or other people around him by thirsting after his stepbrother.

Jimin's laughter does nothing more except jab him in the chest.

“You're supposed to be on my side,” Taehyung whines.

“I *am* on your side,” Jimin says patiently, humour lining his words. Then his voice sobers. “Seriously, though. I think you've got to give him some time. A new family is a big adjustment and not everyone is as... accommodating, as you are. He's probably still trying to adjust.”

“I hate when you're right,” Taehyung groans. He rolls over on the bed until he's staring at the ceiling. “Wait. Did you just call me a pushover?”

“Oh, what’s that? Jihyo needs help?” Jimin shouts over on the other end. He makes a strange buzzing sound through his teeth. “Sorry, Taehyung, I think we’re breaking up, I gotta go anyway—”

“You suck, and I hope Hobi-hyung never sucks your dick!”

“He already has,” Jimin cackles, right before hanging up.

Hold on a second, his best friend’s finally gotten with that one guy he’s been pining over since the beginning of time (alright, Taehyung might be exaggerating but it’s been pretty damn long) and he’s not said a single thing about it? And isn’t Hoseok with that grumpy blond senior?

“You asshole!” Taehyung shouts into the receiver, even though the dial tone has long since taken over whatever static Jimin had been trying to fake.

This night plays host to another tense, awkward family dinner. Taehyung’s father prepares all the dishes as usual and his stepmother lays the cutlery, and the four of them sit at the old wooden table, one person on each side. It’s just like it has been for the past two, three, ten weeks—at this point, Taehyung has lost count of the number of days he’s had to ignore the glares drilling into the back of his head—and he is all ready to sit through another thirty-three minutes of silence and false starts, but two and a half minutes in, Taehyung’s father clears his throat.

“Your mother and I have been thinking,” his father says, adjusting the glasses on his nose and breathing deeply, and Taehyung’s breath catches in his throat at *‘eomma’*, “that you two should move in together.”

The loud clatter of metal hitting plastic echoes through the air when Jeongguk lets go of his spoon, hands balling into fists instantly, the veins on his forearms standing out tense and stark. And, for Taehyung, he doesn’t know what expression he wears on his own face; all he knows is that there’s something in his throat, and his lips are pulled back in a sneer (he never sneers) and even the mere *idea* of living in

close quarters with Jeon Jeongguk makes him want to hurl.

“No,” Jeongguk says. His voice is eerily calm and unwavering and he looks not at Taehyung's father, but his own mother. “I am not moving in with him.”

“You are brothers.” Yein's tone leaves no room for discussion. “It will be cheaper for you to room together instead of renting separate apartments, and you go to the same school.”

“It'll help you two get to know each other better,” Taehyung's father chips in.

“Dad,” Taehyung pleads. “You know we're not gonna get along. It's been two weeks and we've barely spoken to each other, you know it's not gonna end up well.”

“If you haven't even spoken, how do you know you won't get along?”

“*Because* some people aren't inclined to even try,” Taehyung hisses, side-eyeing Jeongguk who returns the glare with a stink-eye of his own. “It's not gonna work out well. We're both so busy anyway and the dorms are pretty cheap, too, there's no reason for either of us to move out.”

“The dorms are cheap, but renting an apartment together will be cheaper,” Yein interrupts. Her voice is as certain and assertive as her son's, but simmering beneath the words is not anger or frustration but a cold, detached rationality. “We've already found an apartment for you. One of my friends is a landlord in central Seoul; the place is only ten minutes' walk from your university, and the rent is cheap.”

“Are we short on money? Can we really not afford to just stay at the dorms? Why must we stay together?”

Taehyung swallows the swear words that are threatening to bubble up. He hates how Yein and his father are probably right, it really is cheaper and the apartment sounds great and he'd snap it up in a heartbeat any other day, if not for the fact that he has to share it with his stepbrother. The stepbrother that runs cold one minute and hot the next (mostly cold, though) and that Jimin's convinced he wants to bone.

In the midst of all the discussion, Taehyung's barely noticed that Jeongguk has pushed his bowl to the center of the table, that the younger boy has seethed in silent with his jaw clenched and brows

knitted and nostrils flared.

He barely notices it, until the screech of chair legs against the floor catches his attention. Both of Jeongguk's hands cling on to the edge of the table, knuckles white, the muscles of his forearm visible and tensed all the way up to his pale biceps. He breathes in; once, twice, as if trying to quell down whatever is bubbling in his stomach. It doesn't work, though, Taehyung thinks. Not by the way he's frantically gulping and his eyes, already sparkling on a typical day, turn even more watery than usual.

Not by the way his mouth falls open just slightly and he dips his teeth into his bottom lip just before saying, for the second time, *"I am not moving in with him."*

"You are stepbrothers." Yein is stern and unrelenting and it shows in the way she narrows her eyes at her son and purses her lips like she has dealt with his temper a thousand times before. "And you are my son, and you will listen to what I say."

"Jeongguk-ah," Taehyung's father says, his tone considerably softer than his wife's. "Just try it out for a bit, alright? You too, Taehyung," he adds, looking at Taehyung, who's still curled into himself in his chair. "We've already made the down payment. Three months. After three months, if you two still don't want to live together, we won't force you."

Jeongguk swallows again, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down. He sucks in his lower lip and it would look cute—adorable, even—if it weren't for the way he spreads his fist into a palm and curls it back in again, the way he breathes even heavier as if he were trying to stop himself from bursting.

It doesn't work. Taehyung never for a minute believed it would work.

Taehyung expects Angry Jeongguk to blow his top, to open his mouth wide and let the swear words and insults pour out. He expects Jeongguk's anger to come crashing over everyone in the vicinity like a giant wave, bringing everyone else down. He expects fist-banging and shouting and yelling at the top of lungs.

He doesn't expect Angry Jeongguk to seethe silently, to glare at the tabletop while digging his fingernails into his palm. He doesn't expect a pregnant silence to fill the air, Jeongguk's gradually heavier breathing the only sound. He doesn't expect a choked, pathetic sob to crawl out of Jeongguk's throat before he turns tail and leaves, the way

he slams his chair back into place the only indication of any sort of anger.

"I'll go back to bed first," Taehyung says softly.

He stares at his own bowl of unfinished rice before getting up and taking his leave, too, not even bothering to look his father and stepmother in the eye. All he can think about is the helpless look in Jeongguk's eyes and the uncertainty in his own heart.

Taehyung isn't the least bit surprised when Jeongguk misses the next family dinner and the three after that. He is surprised when he walks into the new cafe two blocks from his workplace and orders a "large caramel latte, please, extra whip" and comes face to face with a familiar pair of large eyes and small lips and tousled, black hair, like the boy hadn't even tried to look the least bit presentable.

"Taehyung?" Jeongguk asks, too stunned to even try to be rude.

"Taehyung-*hyung*," Taehyung replies automatically. When the shock of seeing each other finally wears off (it takes half a second, and in that half a second three new orders have come in but Jeongguk is still rooted to the ground), the awkwardness washes over them. Taehyung wrings his fingers together in an attempt to find something, anything to do. He starts, hesitantly, "So, uh, you work here?"

"Yeah," Jeongguk deadpans. Okay, everything is back to normal now. Nothing more to see. He turns away to work on whatever orders there are, and a few minutes later he calls out, deliberately *not* looking in Taehyung's direction, "Large caramel latte for Kaneki Ken!"

Oh, god. He really shouldn't have tried to be funny, Taehyung thinks. Heat spreads across his cheeks and he raises a hand sheepishly. Steps forward and clears his throat. "That'd be me."

"Kaneki Ken?" Jeongguk asks incredulously. There's a tug at the end of his lip but he's fighting it off, and it almost looks like he is twitching uncontrollably and Taehyung can't help but snicker. "What's so funny?"

"Your face," Taehyung replies, smiling. It's strange. He doesn't really

remember smiling genuinely in front of Jeongguk.

“Tokyo Ghoul?”

Taehyung nods, impressed. “Didn't know you were weeaboo trash.”

The younger boy raises his brows. “Says the one who names himself after a white-haired anime character,” he says, before realising that he's being just a tad too friendly and resuming the stone-cold facade. His lips pull downward and his gaze flattens off, and he returns to whatever he was doing, i.e. earning money.

This is his chance, Taehyung thinks.

“You've been missing dinner,” Taehyung says. He sips on his caramel latte—it's surprisingly good, just the right amount of sugar and caramel and milk and coffee, and he makes to thank the barista before realising the barista is Jeon fucking Jeongguk—and pauses. “You should come back for dinner.”

Jeongguk flat-out ignores him. He places a steaming hot cup onto the tray and calls out, “Double espresso for Youngjae!”

“I know I'm the last person you want to listen to,” Taehyung continues, “and I don't know what you have against me, but I don't want to do this either. But they've already paid the deposit and it's a good apartment, and just for three months, and we should just try it out.” He breathes. “Not like we have a choice, anyway.”

“Matcha latte for Hyojin!”

“They miss you.” Taehyung sucks in a breath. “Our parents, I mean. I don't miss you, not really. You're kinda rude and uncooperative but it's making everyone else grumpy, so I think you should just go back for a bit. Or at least make an *effort* to try and get along.” He looks up, now, and finds that Jeongguk is staring at him and his eyes are dark, too dark. Something's swimming beneath the surface and Taehyung can't tell if it is soft or hard. “What happened to the boy who cared enough to ask about his crying brother?”

The last few syllables seem to snap Jeongguk out of whatever daze he'd been stuck in, and his eyes dart away to somewhere else, wherever else, resettling on a vague corner to the left of Taehyung. Pink spreads over his cheeks, suspiciously like a blush, and Taehyung is suddenly overcome with the urge to reach out and just *touch* him.

Jeongguk breathes deeply before finally, finally turning to face Taehyung straight-on.

“I'm not going to make a scene here,” he says, voice level. “I don't have anything against you, but I don't need to explain to you why I am the way I am.” He purses his lips. “You tell my mum that I will go back for dinner and that I'll go along with that stupid apartment thing, but I'm not happy about it.”

Taehyung relaxes. His shoulders fall and the weight on his chest is lifted. Well, sort of. Not wholly, not until he figures out what on earth is going on in the strange, strange mind of Jeongguk; but for now, he will revel in the relief that this tiny, tiny bit of cooperation gives him.

When Taehyung reaches home that night, his legs feel like they're about to give way. A bug's been spreading around and it's been nonstop filing and running around, tending to the animals while trying to fend off their concerned owners' defensive and thoroughly pissed off faces. Yes, he understands why they're upset (because their pets are the embodiment of Miserable and Sick), but that doesn't mean they have to take it out on him, right?

Anyway. Point being that he's thoroughly exhausted after a day of clambering around the office and listening to dogs bark and cats meow and fish... make whatever sound fish make, goddamn it. Every nook and cranny of his body feels stiff as hell and all he wants is a nice bubble bath.

Firstly, though, he needs a smoke, just to get the edge off. It's not really just the hectic day; it's the nagging tension hanging around the house, the conflict waiting to erupt. And Taehyung doesn't like conflict.

He is pretty convinced his parents don't know he smokes. It's a habit he picked up off Hoseok in his first year of university; the dancer was all smiles and enthusiasm but he always seemed kinda tense, ready to pounce, always jittery and a ball of nerves. That, and he was always rushing out for “just a quick smoke, pinky swear!” and every time, after he finished his cigarette and crushed the butt underneath the sole of his worn-out Doc Martens, he would be looser. More relaxed, like something had lifted from his shoulders.

And so, one day, Taehyung had simply pinched the cigarette hanging from Hoseok's mouth with his two fingers and stuck it into his own. It had been weird at first; he couldn't hold it between his lips properly, he couldn't inhale and exhale properly. But slowly, over time, he learned.

He doesn't smoke often, though. Just a social smoker, someone who smokes if others bum him a cigarette and not to stop himself from falling off the edge. On days like these, though, there's nothing better than a quick shot of nicotine and tar into his lungs.

Taehyung breathes in; his ribcage moves upward, his chest heaves, and the warm, bitter haze of tobacco fills his lungs. Then he exhales, eyes fluttering close, smoke chasing from his mouth, head falling back against the concrete.

"I didn't know you smoked."

His eyes blink open and he turns his head, scalp scratching against the rough brick. Jeongguk stands there, hands in his pockets and looking unusually small, still wearing the black polo from the cafe.

Any other time today, and maybe Taehyung would scoff. Say something rude, spit at his feet, let an incredulous laugh escape from his lips. But he's currently drugged up on nicotine and he's just on the edge of tipsy—god, what wouldn't he do for some vodka right now—so the boy's appearance is not so much a punch to the gut as it is a small nudge.

"Well, rough day," Taehyung says, looking down at his cigarette. Huh, that was fast. It's all gone now. He throws it at his feet and crushes it with the heel of his sneakers. He turns to Jeongguk and smiles, because being civil is the least he can do. "Want a cig?"

"It's fine," Jeongguk deadpans. He straightens up and his hands fly from his pockets to fold up into a cross-armed position.

"Why do you hate me so much?" Taehyung asks. He brings the lighter up to the cigarette between his teeth, and the words come out slightly muffled. When the flames finally catch the end of the cigarette, he takes a long drag and watches the smoke fly into the evening sky before turning his eyes on Jeongguk. "What did I ever do to you?"

"I don't hate you." The next second, his eyes drop to the ground and his hands fall to wring together and Taehyung can't wrap his head around how Jeongguk goes from cold and stoic one moment to an

awkward boy the next. "I know I've been kinda rude to you, and I'm sorry for that."

Jeongguk looks sincere enough, with his giant doe eyes and round cheeks and that reluctant pout, that Taehyung almost believes him.

"I don't know if I forgive you." Taehyung shrugs. He's got the upper hand right now and he will milk it for all it's worth. "I mean, I'm a nice person in general, but you really *have* been unreasonably immature. But we've still got to deal with each other for the better part of the rest of the year, so."

Jeongguk scoffs, but it's laced with amusement rather than mirth. He leans against the wall next to Taehyung, brings his arms up to pillow his head against his palms, and the bulge of his biceps doesn't escape Taehyung one bit.

"As long as we stay out of each other's way, right?" Jeongguk smirks, a corner of his mouth pulling upward and as it pulls Taehyung in. "As long as we're civil."

"We don't have to be friends," Taehyung says, turning away so that he can erase the image of the evening sun catching on Jeongguk's face. "We just have to get along."

The silence of an empty house bears down on Taehyung as he enters. There's something different in the air; no one is around, the lack of noise is deafening, and each step he takes feels strangely light.

"Taehyung."

A pair of arms snake around his body from the back and they're not familiar, not at all, but they're so comfortable that he wishes they were. Heat pools in the bottom of his stomach as the stranger nudges a muscled thigh between his own, pries his legs apart, but as good as it feels, he struggles aside because *what the fuck is going on?*

Taehyung spins around and pushes the mystery guy away, only to come face-to-face with his stepbrother, clad only in boxers and a loose t-shirt. Jeongguk crinkles his nose and pouts petulantly.

“Why'd you do that for?” Jeongguk says, stalking toward Taehyung like predator would to prey. “I thought you said you were on edge all day. Wanted something to take it off.”

Before Taehyung knows it, a pair of lips is on his own and Jeongguk's tongue is snaking into his mouth and Jeongguk's fingers are in his hair, tugging, teasing groans out of his own mouth.

He lets himself relax; pushes away the thoughts in his mind that this is probably really fucking wrong, that he needs to have fun for a bit and he deserves it and *fuck* if he hadn't been eyeing Jeongguk's arms and thighs and face and everything else since the moment he'd laid eyes on the boy. Fuck if he hadn't been wanting to run his hands all over that pale skin and claim it for his own.

He's been trying to resist it for the better part of the summer. He knows it, and in those snatches of moments where his eyes catch Jeongguk's and their gazes lock and everything darkens into a haze, heat coiling in his lower body, he likes to believe that Jeongguk knows it too. Never mind the fact that for all his life, he's known himself to be straight—maybe it's just Jeongguk, then, Jeongguk with his childish demeanour and pouty lips and giant eyes—never mind that all his life, he has been attracted to girls. It's the fact that not only is all this touching and kissing and grinding happening between two guys; it's happening between two stepbrothers.

Taehyung plays the role of the perfect kid most of the time. He abandoned his lofty dreams of pursuing graphic design and dived head-first into Economics instead. He prepares dinners on the days no one is at home, wraps them in cling film and tops the tupperware with post-its, instructions on how to reheat the food.

But he drinks and smokes and has sex and gets high behind his parents' back for the better part of the year, whenever he's back up in Seoul. And if he wasn't headed straight for hell already, he thinks, running a finger over Jeongguk's nipple and grinning when the boy shivers against his body, then his name is certainly on that list now.

So he simply lets himself relax, loosens under Jeongguk's hold even as the younger boy's touch spreads fire under his skin. He slips his hands under Jeongguk's shirt and meets smooth skin, presses his chest against the boy's and revels in the fact that even though Jeongguk is more muscled, Taehyung has still got a couple of centimetres on the boy.

“I’m taller than you,” he laughs. Jeongguk pulls back and sticks out his tongue, and all Taehyung can do is kiss him again. He nudges his thigh between Jeongguk’s, just like the younger boy had done to him earlier.

But even as he falls into it and gives in, there’s a nagging feeling in the back of his mind that they’re fucking *stepbrothers*.

He’s about to pull back—he’s about to say something rational, something along the lines of *we should not be doing this we’re about to fuck everything up holy shit*—but in the one moment that sense decides to settle in, Jeongguk rolls his hips against Taehyung’s and Taehyung tenses and hardens, and an obscene sound escapes from someone’s mouth. Jeongguk’s, maybe, or Taehyung’s. Probably both.

“God, you’re so—” Taehyung grits, hand moving down to Jeongguk’s hips to still them for one painful second as Jeongguk smirks, “—so fucking unfair.”

Jeongguk doesn’t reply with words. Instead, his reply comes in another self-indulgent smirk. His eyes darken and he grinds right up against Taehyung, digging his leg even further between Taehyung’s thighs, and at this point Taehyung is literally humping against Jeongguk’s leg. Fuck if it isn’t embarrassing, but fuck if it doesn’t feel good.

Even though Taehyung sinks his teeth into his bottom lip to muffle his groans, a high-pitched whine still escapes all the same. He leans forward to catch Jeongguk’s mouth again, but the younger boy ducks away immediately. His hands land on Taehyung’s shoulders to push him up against the wall and he bends down, digs his knees into the carpet floor.

And, oh god, what a sight this is, Taehyung thinks. He’s seen many beautiful things in his short life, but nothing compares to the boy between his knees right now, cheeks flushed and lips red and swollen and plump, eyes half-lidded and darkened over with lust.

Jeongguk reaches a hand up and pulls down Taehyung’s sweat aching slowly, running his hands over Taehyung’s stomach.

Then he leans forward and mouths at Taehyung’s cock, hard and straining against the fabric, through the thin cotton. There’s no holding back now; everything is hot and warm and Taehyung groans out loud, head knocking backward against the wall.

His fingers reach down to tangle in Jeongguk's hair—he tugs gently, testing the waters, and breathes, voice hoarse, “You fucking tease.”

A small sound escapes into the air; low and raspy and hoarse, a moan tugged out from Jeongguk's throat even as his mouth is wrapped around Taehyung's clothed cock. Taehyung raises an eyebrow. He catches Jeongguk's gaze again and pulls, harder this time, and there's no mistaking it—the sound that comes out is definitely a moan. Eyelids flutter close and Jeongguk moves backward for a second, breathes in as if calming himself.

“You like that,” Taehyung says. It's more a statement than a question, and the realisation that Jeongguk likes having his hair pulled makes him smirk. “Good boy.”

Jeongguk blinks open and glares at Taehyung. It would be intimidating, if not for the fact that he was currently crouched between Taehyung's legs, lips swollen from taking Taehyung in.

As if out of spite, he pulls Taehyung's boxers all the way down, almost harsh and rough in his actions. His fingers fly to Taehyung's hips to steady himself and Taehyung sucks in a breath—he expects Jeongguk to take him in with one swift, fast movement, mirroring the messiness of everything that's happened so far.

Instead, Jeongguk simply licks, lips barely ghosting the girth of Taehyung's cock as his tongue darts out to circle around the tip. And the whole time, he stares right back up at Taehyung; he can't smile with his mouth, not when it's stretched around Taehyung, but his eyes definitely do.

“Still a tease, aren't you?” Taehyung says, even as he squeezes his eyes shut because Jeongguk has just taken in almost his entire length and everything is hot and warm and wet, and if this is what being sucked off by Jeongguk is like he can't imagine what it would be like to fuck him. What it would be like to be fucked by him.

“You're a mouthy one.”

Jeongguk releases Taehyung with a lewd pop, voice hoarse and raspy, and Taehyung misses the warmth. He wipes Taehyung's precome off with his fingers before sliding them into his mouth, one by one, coating his own mouth with Taehyung.

Then, still on his knees, he peers right back up at Taehyung—and in any other situation, he would look terribly young and innocent, all

large doe eyes and round cheeks and a pretty pink mouth. But with his eyes clouded over with lust and cheeks flushed crimson and mouth swollen and stung, he looks less like a poster child for youth and more like someone who really, really needs to be fucked.

“I want to fuck your mouth,” Taehyung breathes.

And for some inane reason, Jeongguk complies. He takes Taehyung in again, but all the way to the base this time, and Taehyung feels himself hitting the back of Jeongguk's throat. The younger boy gags for a moment, but he must have been blessed with the absence of a gag reflex because *god* he is so fucking hot around Taehyung, even as Taehyung thrusts into Jeongguk again and again.

The edge was never that far to begin with, but it's nearer than ever now, and with each pull of Jeongguk's hair and each time Jeongguk takes him in, slides down for a temporary release and then returns to swallow his entire length, Taehyung gets closer and closer.

“Fuck, Jeongguk,” he groans, the moment he tips over the edge and spills into Jeongguk's mouth, still warm and wet. Eyes squeezing shut, hips still tense and straining from the effort, pleasure and adrenaline striking him down to the bone.

When he opens his eyes again, he's not propped against a wall, nor is Jeongguk between his legs. He's surrounded by soaked sheets with a hand down his soiled boxers, sweat lining his forehead.

Fuck, he thinks. He lets his head fall back onto the pillow and attempts to erase the entire wet dream from his mind.

A few seconds pass and he makes to clean up the mess; maybe if he erases the evidence, he can pretend that nothing ever happened.

fall 2015, i

School has started back up. It's supposed to be fall, but the heat from summer lingers in the air. It's still warm and stuffy, sweat pools on Taehyung's forehead within seconds the moment he steps out of his apartment—and he's back in Seoul now, which makes the humidity about a hundred times worse. (It also means it's no longer *his* apartment, it's *their* apartment. But he doesn't want to think too much about that.)

He's back in Seoul now. The fourth day of classes is just about to begin and he's already beginning to feel the brunt of waking up at eight and studying till nine or ten, only to escape to the playground for drinks till the morning sun starts to peek over the skyscrapers. And in these four days, he's barely caught sight of his roommate (stepbrother, flatmate, rent-sharing-burden) at all. He has little problem with it, though; the few glimpses he *has* snatched merely brought up memories of how he'd woken up not too long ago, images of a thoroughly gone Jeongguk—lips red and plump, voice hoarse as he choked out Taehyung's name—fresh in Taehyung's mind.

A grimace paints his face when he walks out of his (*their*) Hapjeong apartment and the sun immediately beams down on his face. All he wants now is to brisk walk those ten minutes to the university and settle in with cool, cool air conditioning.

FROM: JIMBLES

Playground tonight

You in?

TO: JIMBLES

broooooo

duh

do u even ned taa ask

FROM: JIMBLES

Are you already drunk????

It's 8.32 on a Thursday

nah jsut lazy a sf

and autocorect is fo r lzrs

Thankfully, today's an easy day. His classes end by two and he can head back for a quick nap, maybe fuck around on the internet for a bit, before meeting everyone else for drinks by the children's playground a stone's throw from his place.

He stumbles into Intermediate Macroeconomics, eyes still bleary, and darts straight for the seat by the window.

"Taehyung-oppa, do you have your Macroeconomics notes from last year?" The girl in front of him whips her head around, ponytail swishing in the air prettily. She looks friendly enough, all bright, round eyes and a small face with impossibly smooth skin. Even her voice rings in the air like fairy bells. "I didn't really pay attention in class, so..."

He's just about to answer with a tentative yes, he's still got his notes, but they're in really bad shape and he should probably polish them up before passing them on, when someone else clears their throat.

"I've got mine with me, it's alright." The voice is familiar, frighteningly familiar, but Taehyung has only ever heard it when it was lined with mirth and anger (or when it was moaning his name, over and over again and lips ghosted around his cock). He almost jumps in his seat. "You can have them."

"Oh," the girl says, eyes widening. At first, her brows are knitted and her lips are pursed, but the moment she scans Jeongguk from head to toe, the frown on her mouth becomes a mischievous smirk. She grins, whole body turning to face the newcomer. "Thank you so much. My name's Jeonghwa."

"No problem," Jeongguk replies. Taehyung's still reeling; he's not used to seeing his stepbrother this... nice. He turns around to rummage around his bag—t-shirt straining around his arm muscles as he does so, and Taehyung desperately tries to pry his eyes away—and passes Jeonghwa a couple of notebooks that she happily accepts, short fingers grazing over Jeongguk's own. "I'm Jeongguk."

"Thanks," Jeonghwa says again. "You know, there's an empty seat right here, you should—"

“It's okay.”

Jeongguk turns away immediately and with him facing the other direction, Taehyung sees that as pleasant as his tone is, there is anything but a smile playing on his lips. They're small and pink and the bottom lip is ever so slightly fuller than the top, and it's pursed into a what most would call a Resting Bitch Face.

And when he settles himself into the seat right behind Taehyung, Taehyung tenses up immediately. His shoulders stiffen and he swallows, his throat closes up. He's acutely aware of Jeongguk's presence behind him, overwhelming every other thing in the room.

“You don't seem too happy to see me,” Jeongguk murmurs almost absently, voice low enough that it is almost lost through the sea of students filing in; then he tacks on, “*hyung*.”

Since when did Jeongguk get so snarky? Taehyung's used to flat-out being ignored or straightforward rudeness, not this passive-aggressive shit.

“Aren't you a Chemistry major? What are you doing in Macroeconomics?”

There's the scrape of chair legs against the floor. Taehyung refuses to turn behind, but he just *knows* that Jeongguk's probably leaning into the chair, arms folded over his chest, Timberland-clad heels anchoring him to the ground as he rocks back on two back legs.

“Fulfilling my General Education requirements,” Jeongguk says.

“Ah, okay.”

Taehyung stays resolutely silent for the rest of the lecture; this is the one class where he knows no one, not with Jimin having a History of Dance tutorial during this same block and the rest of his friends toiling away in the graduate students' labs. It's a little awkward, a little tense—he can practically feel Jeongguk breathing down his neck, because the boy is surprisingly loud, the sound of pen scratching against the surface like a staccato in the air, the shuffling of paper and books every other minute. Each small sound from behind just reminds him of Jeongguk.

“Are you alright?” The boy sitting beside him cocks his head to the side. “You don't seem very well.”

At this, Taehyung immediately loosens his shoulders. Or, well, he tries to. He takes in a deep breath and replies, "Yeah, I'm okay. Just a bit tired."

"Tell me 'bout it," the boy laughs. He has a nice smile, Taehyung thinks, the kind that reaches his eyes. "I'm Minjae, Business major."

"Taehyung, Economics major."

The hushed whispers they exchange for the rest of the lecture help take his mind off of the hulking presence sitting behind him, probably glaring daggers into his skull or plotting how to use all the hot water before Taehyung has a chance to. It helps, only barely, but just enough for him to break out in a grin by the end of the lesson and walk away with a new friend, darting away to his next class before Jeongguk can say a word.

Taehyung makes it through the day somehow. Though it's only a few classes, the thought of actually having to see Jeongguk in school from now onwards weighs on his mind and makes those few hours feel like a few years. So when he crashes onto his bed for a nap and wakes up without any one interfering, he's thoroughly relieved and immediately heads for the playground.

The playground is... the playground is an interesting place, a flea market on Saturday afternoons and a not-so-secret hiding spot for anyone who wants to get drunk as quickly and cheaply as possible. Exhibit A: Park Jimin and Friends.

His best friend is already there, even though the sun has barely set, parked himself on one of the benches and an assortment of soju and beer surrounding him. Everyone else is there, too: Hoseok, Yoongi, Namjoon and Seokjin, all the graduate students whose friend group he and Jimin had somehow found their way into, despite almost never seeing each other during the day. Quite a number of other people are there too, some halfway to drunk and some halfway to sober, the promise of a Thursday night out calling their name.

"Taehyung! Over here!" Hoseok calls out, one hand waving him over and the other gripping the neck of an almost-empty soju bottle. Taehyung squints; it's grapefruit, of course. His hyung never really

learnt how to down the fresh stuff and always scoffed at mixing it with beer.

Taehyung props himself against one of the shelter's pillars, not keen on having to sit in any of his hyungs' laps. Maybe another night, but not now.

He accepts the bottle of fresh, unflavoured soju from a soundless Yoongi with thanks and takes a large swig. (It tastes bad, like straight-up vodka but a thousand times worse. It burns him from the inside but he kind of likes it. He's learned to like it.)

"Parents didn't let you raid their liquor cabinet back home?" Namjoon asks, grinning and he drinks from his own bottle.

"You know it." Taehyung lets out a loud, dramatic sigh. "They'd kill me if they knew I drank."

"Seoul is hardly sin city, but it's pretty damn close," Yoongi adds. Pressed up against his side, Jimin laughs, a high-pitched sound that evolves into a full-blown giggle fit, and Yoongi adjusts his arm so that Jimin can rest his face in the crook of the elder's neck. (This, whatever it is, only ever happens when the two are drugged up on alcohol. Everyone else has long since learnt not to question it.) "How's junior year life treating you?"

"Shit, as expected."

"I think Tae's got a lil' something to tell you guys," Jimin snickers. This time, he falls to his right and into Hoseok's hold—Yoongi's arm is still around his shoulders and now Hoseok's is around his waist, the young dancer wound around two others. "C'mon, Tae, tell us."

Taehyung should laugh. Shit, he really should, he should let incredulity wreck his whole body till he is nothing but a shaking mess of amusement. But he honest-to-god can't do anything other than freeze the way he'd done so earlier in the day when he'd heard Jeongguk's voice out of nowhere. It's familiar—the way his feet root themselves to the ground, how his shoulders tense up and his jaw clenches.

It might have been two seconds or two minutes or two hours, but eventually it's Seokjin who breaks the silence with a gentle voice and firm tone.

"Hey, Namjoon," Seokjin starts, nudging the younger boy, "didn't you

get those new Camels? Let Taehyung try them.”

Maybe it's because they're already slightly tipsy from the soju, but that's all it takes for the tension to break. Everyone's attention is directed toward a struggling Namjoon, resolutely digging through the pocket of his coat for a pack of cigarettes.

“They're really good,” Namjoon says, finally fishing out the pack. It's an obnoxious neon pink with an actual camel on the front, and Taehyung doesn't think it looks very good at all. “Turkish, some strong stuff. Better than that weak-ass Raison shit that Jackson keeps trying to preach.”

“I'm holding you to that, hyung,” Taehyung says with a grin, finally loosening up.

He takes one from the pack and brings it to his mouth; lights it up and watches as the embers sizzle a bright orange in the dark (and realises that the sun has already set). And it really is a lot stronger than that 'weak-ass Raison shit', just like Namjoon promised. He'd seen these around before, five hundred won cheaper than Marlboros and Raisons, but never really bothered to buy a pack since he only ever smoked when he was out with friends and he fit the broke college kid stereotype way too well to afford smoking regularly.

But these—these are great, he thinks, as he takes another drag. Just a bottle of soju and a couple of puffs and he already feels the familiar, substance-induced high catching up to him.

“I still remember the first time you smoke,” Hoseok sighs, eyes slightly glazed over. “Back of the dance studio, bummed you a menthol, and you still choked.”

“Because I have clean, pure lungs, thank you very much,” Taehyung scoffs.

“So,” Yoongi says abruptly. His voice is the most steady, even steadier than Seokjin's, as if he'd never had a single drop of alcohol. “You're not staying in the dorms anymore?”

“Ah, no,” Taehyung says. He takes another drag—he's going to need it. “I'm renting an apartment.”

“Who with?”

“My step—my family friend's son,” Taehyung quickly corrects. He's

not sure if he's ready to tell them about his new infuriatingly passive-aggressive stepbrother. He's not sure if he will ever be ready. "He's a bit of a dickhead, but what can you do?"

Everyone laughs at that, and Taehyung echoes the sound. What *can* he do, really?

Jimin is the one who suggests that they all head over the club, but he is also the one who ends up face-planting into the ground before it's even twelve, so any plans they have of dancing the alcohol away are justly botched. Instead, Hoseok and Yoongi grab the boy, sling one arm over each shoulder and with a shake of their heads, brings him back to their shared apartment. (Okay, fine. Taehyung can believe that Hoseok's sucked Jimin's dick, and he's probably sucked Yoongi's too.)

Namjoon and Seokjin take their leave, too, but not before asking Taehyung whether he's alright and okay and able to make it back completely intact.

"Don't worry, parents," Taehyung smiles as wide as he possibly can, "I'm a hundred and two percent sober. Two percent because I will be blasting Big Bang's 'Sober' as I walk back, earphones and all."

And that is how he stumbles back into the apartment at one in the morning. Everything is a bit of a mess, the colours are all blending into each other and while his vision isn't quite blurry, he does feel more dizzy than usual and just the slightest, slightest bit happier. Like his heart is looser, like his mind is clearer (not really). Like the night out with his friends has helped steer his attention away from unworthy, unfairly attractive fuckboys.

He groans out loud. There he goes again, fucking everything up. Just when he thought he could get a good night's rest, Jeongguk pops back into his mind.

And Jeongguk is right there in person, too, seated on the couch with his torso on full display and only a pair of sweatpants to cover his body up. His computer's propped in his lap and he is ever so slightly hunched over it, the action making his core clench and his abs flex and it's kinda hot, it's still sorta summer and there's sweat dripping

from his forehead (maybe that's why he's only wearing sweatpants) and down the planes of his face and into the dip of his collarbone, down and down—

“What are you staring at?” Jeongguk deadpans. He raises his brows, unamused, and eyes Taehyung, who isn't exactly in the best state right now—wide-collared shirt almost hanging halfway off his shoulders, eyes glassy from the high, cheeks flushed from the soju and an unused cigarette between his fingers. “Are you drunk?”

“I'm a hundred percent sober,” Taehyung croaks out, still reeling from the image of a shirtless Jeongguk and *holy shit* it's not an image he's actual real. He pulls his earphones out. “Lost the two percent 'cause I've stopped putting Big Bang on loop.”

“Not even gonna ask,” Jeongguk mutters. He diverts his attention back toward the computer for a full second before his eyes dart back toward Taehyung, almost reluctantly. “You should go shower. Then eat. Get some food in your stomach to stave off the hangover.”

“Aw,” Taehyung coos, stepping forward and reaching out a hand to ruffle Jeongguk's hair, “didn't know you cared so much about me.”

“Fuck off,” Jeongguk snaps. He shakes his head to get rid of Taehyung's hand (a good thing, actually, since his fingers were starting to make their way to Jeongguk's scalp and grasp at the roots for no apparent reason).

He immediately stands up and walks toward the kitchen. The sight of his glorious bare back, pale and smooth and muscled, makes Taehyung gulp.

“Banana?” Jeongguk asks, holding one in his hand and shaking it up and down. “Potassium's good.”

“Oh my god,” Taehyung groans. He closes his eyes. The sight of Jeongguk with that... that *thing* in his hand makes him want to either rut against a bed or throw himself onto Jeongguk. Or both, really. “No, thank you.”

“You sure you're alright?” Jeongguk sounds genuinely concerned this time even through a mouthful of glorified potassium.

Taehyung peeks through his fingers—he had no idea when, how or *why* he'd even covered his eyes, but he supposes (in the back of his mind, in a voice that sounds suspiciously like Jimin's snarky, I-

fucking-told-you voice) that he might be slightly thirsty for Jeongguk and his reflexes of Do-Not-Jump-Your-Stepbrother!!!!!! naturally kicked in—and sees Jeongguk's mouth, small and pink, circling the tip of the banana.

Just the tiniest bite, almost kittenish. Tongue darting out at the last second to wet the fruit and then to wet his own lips. Eyes as round and wide as the day they'd first met. Adam's apple bobbing as he swallows, mouth falling open in a small 'o' to take another bite.

Heat surges in Taehyung's stomach (or, more specifically, his lower abdomen, in the region dangerously near his crotch) and, hell—he's not a horny drunk, he's not even *drunk*, but he wants to fuck Jeongguk (or maybe he just wants a really good fuck). And even slightly inebriated, he still knows it's a bad, bad idea.

“Yeah, I'm fine,” Taehyung croaks out. How he's managed that without keeling over in embarrassment, he has no clue. There must be a fucking tent in his pants right now. “I'll just get to bed.”

He pushes past Jeongguk and into his bedroom before the younger boy can say anything else. He collapses onto the bed, squeezes his eyes shut and tries his hardest to forget.

Considering he eventually falls asleep to the image of Jeongguk eating a fucking *banana*, it's a miracle he doesn't wake up with sticky sheets (again) or a hand down his pants.

“Just tell me,” Taehyung hisses under his breath. As boring as Statistics is, he's not one to shout at the top of his lungs or stand up in the middle of class to break the monotony, even if it is to get his best friend to fucking *talk* to him. “What's going on?”

Right before the first class of the day, he'd arranged to meet Jimin at the quad. He was a little more late than usual, half-jogging to the grass patch, and when he finally arrived, Jimin wasn't the only one present. Yoongi and Hoseok were both there, both staring the younger boy down. The former stood his ground, spread his weight over two feet and sucked in a breath, fox eyes narrowed; the latter leaned onto one foot and knitted his brows and that ever-present smile was conspicuously absent.

And Jimin—well, he was another story altogether. He was still standing up, but for all the way he was folded into himself and how his knees shook with each second, he might as well be crumpled in a heap.

The moment he noticed that Taehyung had arrived, relief settled over his body like a godsend and he'd immediately sprinted over to his best friend. Jimin had clutched onto Taehyung's skinny forearm with small hands and tugged them into the building.

This isn't normal. This isn't normal at all. Jimin gets along infamously well with his infamously grumpy boyfriend, the one who busts out track after track at those live clubs that see full houses whenever the name 'Suga' spreads through the university like wildfire. They also happen to get along infamously well with their housemate, the one who takes everything with a bright smile akin to sunshine on winter's day. And if Taehyung were to be honest, the idea that anyone would even be mad at Jimin is blasphemy—the boy is as nice and sweet and kind as they come.

Yet, for the past half hour, Jimin has remained resolutely tight-lipped. The tears that had welled in his eyes (threatened to fall, but never really did) have long since dried up, but the boy still trains his gaze onto the bare slides at the front of the classroom, still refuses to say a single word.

“Are you and Yoongi-hyung doing okay?” Taehyung presses. Or maybe it has to do with what he'd seen the other night, Jimin draping himself over both of his hyungs—not just Yoongi. “Does it have to do with Hobi-hyung? You guys gotta—”

“Shut up, alright?” Jimin snaps. No, he doesn't snap—he *barks*, whips his head to the side so fast Taehyung swears the air stills for a second, and his eyes are steel. “I don't want to talk about it.”

“I'm your best friend,” Taehyung mutters. He's hurt but he refuses to look away. “Why won't you just tell me?”

“This is something I gotta handle by myself, okay?”

“You don't *have* to,” Taehyung pleads.

“You can't even handle your own problems, I doubt you can do anything about mine,” Jimin scoffs.

Something pierces through Taehyung's chest and his heart sinks. If

Jimin knows that he's taken down Taehyung's heart with those few words, he certainly doesn't show it, merely turning back to the front and punctuating the air with a stagnant silence till the end of class.

By the time Taehyung is back at the apartment, the Resting Bitch Face he's wearing has become permanent. Even without a mirror, he can tell that his brows are knitted, the lines on his face are tense, the ends of his mouth are tilted downward in a way that says Stay The Fuck Away, I Am Pissed. Not only has he sorta-kind-a-maybe fallen out with his best friend over something induced by a bad case of out-of-whack hormones, the next few lessons also saw him being unfairly called out by the professors and scolded.

And on most days, Kim Taehyung doesn't care much about his pride, he takes everything in stride; but for some reason, he is jittery and nervous and wound up, and each criticism from his supposed mentors was just more salt on an open wound. That he wasn't good enough, isn't good enough, will never be good enough.

Taehyung throws open the door with the sort of anger that comes with messing up his finals (it's only happened once, and never again). The slam that ensues is loud and booming, and it startles whoever that stranger is, sitting on his couch in nothing but a pair of briefs and a snapback.

He tries his best to keep the sneer out of his voice when he asks, "Who are you?"

"Uh, no one," the boy says, scrambling out of the couch and toward Jeongguk's room. "I'll just grab my clothes and leave."

It's not the first time this has happened. He's been living with Jeongguk for two weeks now, and this is probably the fourth one night stand Taehyung has had the (dis)pleasure of meeting. Save for a lone girl, they all look similar—tall, long and lanky, more soft and lean than well-muscled, and even the girl was taller than average. Almost Jeongguk's height, even.

"I'm too fucking pissed to deal with this," Taehyung mutters under his breath. He can't even be bothered to go to his room. He just wants to lie down and not have to *think*.

The couch is right there, and he flops onto it belly-first, burying his face into the fabric. (At least it's new, and he knows that the suspicious white stain in the corner is from the previous night's carbonara dinner instead of something else.) He lets his eyes flutter

close, heaves a huge breath. Maybe he will take a short rest, a quick one, before cleaning up and actually heading to bed.

But that plan falls apart a few minutes later, just when he's teetering on the edge of sleep. One of the bedroom doors creaks open and someone hisses, "You didn't tell me your roommate was in!"

"Oh my god," Taehyung groans out loud. He turns onto his back and glares at the ceiling. "If you guys want to fuck, just go to a love motel or something."

"It's fine, I'm leaving," the boy mutters hurriedly. He dashes toward the front door with his head down, snapback—and briefs, too, Taehyung supposes—still on, now dressed in a plain t-shirt and worn-out jeans. "Thanks, Jeongguk-hyung."

Jeongguk doesn't even grace the boy with a reply, merely shutting the door and latching it once he's left. Taehyung sits back up (running one hand through his hair to try and make it look more presentable, though all it does is make his hair even messier than it usually is) and cocks his head quizzically at Jeongguk.

"Jeongguk-*hyung*?" Taehyung asks, a smile playing on his mouth. "That's a first. If you're ever a hyung, I must be a super-hyung."

Honestly, Taehyung likes to think of himself as a pretty funny person. Hilarious, even, on good days. But his very funny pun is met with a look of incredulity from Jeongguk—one brow raised, eyes wide and mouth stretched into a funny little shape that makes him look a bit like a meme.

And, really, that is all Taehyung forces himself to focus on because Jeongguk is walking around *without a fucking shirt*. He has clearly taken a shower—hair damp and sticking to his forehead, a towel slung around his neck, grey sweatpants haphazardly thrown on. Taehyung tries and tries to pry his eyes away from the way the water droplets make their way down his neck, past the collarbone and the pecs and into the ridges of his abs (like holy fucking hell, when did Jeongguk even get abs? Is this even legal?). He is definitely *not* eyeing Jeongguk's smooth expanse of skin or the way his biceps contract each time he reaches up to towel off or how his stomach (bare and muscled and on full display) clenches with each step he takes toward Taehyung

—hold on, why's he walking toward Taehyung?

Taehyung gulps and backs into the corner of the couch. When he finally manages to redirect his gaze toward something else, anything else, the hot need of having to just touch Jeongguk fades slightly and in its place is the annoyance he'd been feeling only ten minutes ago.

"Look," he says, words biting and as harsh as he can make them, "I've had a shit day. And I don't think we've laid down enough ground rules for this whole... cohabiting thing, yet."

"And those will be?" Jeongguk asks, leaning against the wall that the couch is backed up into, looking unfairly attractive.

"I really don't care if you bring your fuck buddies over, but don't do it while I'm around." Taehyung makes a face. "No bodily fluids in common areas, too, so don't go around coming all over the couch. If you're heading out or coming back late, make as little noise as possible."

Jeongguk hums in response. "Anything else?"

The younger has barely said anything, but the few words that *have* made it out of his mouth are laced with so much thinly veiled amusement and condescension that Taehyung feels himself bristle.

"I am your hyung, and you will respect me," Taehyung snaps.

There it is—it's finally caught up to him, the annoyance and frustration that's been building up over the whole day. For a moment there, when everything had been silent and dark and his face had been buried into the couch, he thought he would be able to simmer down. To take a step back. But, no, his temper (as rare as it ever shows up) is back and something hot boils in his stomach. He balls his hands into fists and stands up, ignoring how Jeongguk sucks his stomach in and clenches his jaw; and at his full height, he feels more than a little smug that he's an inch taller than Jeongguk.

"I've had a shit day," Taehyung begins, voice low and hoarse with a mix of fatigue and irritation. He takes a step toward Jeongguk and breathes (the boy smells like mint and chamomile). "I'm not gonna tell you about it but I've had a shit day, and I don't appreciate being talked down to by someone who doesn't even know the difference between a dildo and a butt plug."

At this, Jeongguk scrunches his face up and breaks into a fit of giggles. Taehyung frowns; he knows he's naturally funny, but this is a serious matter.

“Stop laughing,” Taehyung snaps.

He leans in, grabs Jeongguk's chin with one hand and forces his gaze upward, and the laughter stops completely. The air is silent, the pause is pregnant. Jeongguk's eyes are impossibly shiny and his pupils are dilated and he's staring right at Taehyung—Taehyung, who stares right back, grip on Jeongguk's face even tighter, the other hand on the wall, caging him in.

He leans in, and they're so close that one could barely fit the width of a palm between their faces. And from this distance, he can tell that Jeongguk—Jeongguk is beautiful, that is the only way to put it. His skin is clear and his eyes are wide and his lips are small but pouty, and the way his lids are hooded just screams for someone to grab him, to take hold. For *Taehyung* to grab him and take hold.

And this, mingled with the residual anger and frustration and that hint of lust that's been whispering in his ear the whole week, makes him want to not just lean in—it makes him want to ravage Jeongguk's mouth with his own, to rake his fingers down Jeongguk's back, to fuck Jeongguk into a mattress.

It's a miracle he even manages to choke out the next few words, considering how fucking tight his pants are.

“I've had a shit day,” he whispers. “And if you're so insistent on making it worse, you better have some idea of how to make it up to me.”

fall 2015, ii

The first time Taehyung had laid his eyes on Jeongguk, he'd already thought that Jeongguk was strong. That Jeongguk was built of nothing but skin and hard muscle and his shoulders spanned the world and his thighs were made of steel.

And Taehyung isn't quite wrong—he just isn't quite right either, he thinks, as he looks at the younger trapped between him and the wall. Taehyung isn't that much taller than Jeongguk, only an inch or two at most, and his body is like a twig next to Jeongguk's, but for some inane reason he's not the one currently being caged in like an animal, breathing heavy, a mix of panic and frustration and something else. Taehyung isn't that much taller than Jeongguk, but right now, he feels really fucking tall.

Too close, he thinks. They're too close.

All he can see is Jeongguk (his eyes; his nose; and his Adam's apple bobbing, the smooth bump of muscle on his exposed throat) but the next second, all he sees is a blur of grey and brown. It takes exactly three seconds for him to realise that he'd just been flipped over. That Jeongguk's hand has his wrist in a vice-like grip because he'd been fucking *flipped over*, and he was now the one with his back to the wall.

“What the fu—”

Jeongguk leans in, and Taehyung is acutely aware of the younger's hands planted on either side of his head. Mere inches away, so close, yet they barely even touch him. It's hard—it's hard, dragging his eyes to meet Jeongguk's, when there is a shirtless torso right there for him to take in, and when Jeongguk's gaze is dark and heated. Eyes hooded, something burning beneath. Pupils so dilated they're barely even there.

A finger grazes his cheek, the callused pads of Jeongguk's thumb ghosting over his skin. And Taehyung freezes, unable to do anything with his throat on fire and his heart racing at a million miles a minute.

Jeongguk's mouth falls open, as if he's about to say something, and in spite of himself Taehyung really wants to know. He wants to know what is running through the boy's head, what cryptic messages are falling about. But Fate seems to enjoy playing cruel tricks on him—all

it takes is a slight misstep, and there's something poking against his hip.

A suspiciously phallic-shaped bulge, tented through thin cotton.

A low sound comes out from Jeongguk's mouth, but he bites his lip in a feeble attempt to stop it. When he moves back, though, it shifts against Taehyung's hip instead of moving away and this time, the groan that sounds out is anything but feeble.

Okay, this is bad. This is really bad. Taehyung's own pants are getting tighter and Jeongguk doesn't seem to be doing any better, eyes half-lidded and knuckles digging into the wall, breaths heavy and loud in the silent room.

Taehyung gulps. The sound is audible even through the tension, and it seems to knock Jeongguk's senses back.

Jeongguk's eyes widen. He sucks in a breath, hands darting away from where they'd been beside Taehyung's head like he's just been burnt.

"Fuck, I'm—fuck, sorry," Jeongguk stutters out, each syllable punctuated with a step backward.

Taehyung wants to reach out, he really does, he wants to stretch out his arm and grab Jeongguk's bare shoulder and squeeze it so that he will stop moving away. Maybe he can drag him back and finally get answers as to what the fuck just went on, but it's as if he is rooted to the ground, unable to do anything other than stare blankly back at Jeongguk and feel his own chest heaving up and down, as if *he* were the one who's just rubbed his boner against Jeongguk's hip. (A very nice hip, v-line snaking down and into the sweatpants and—okay, stop.)

Before he can do anything, Jeongguk is gone. He's darted away, leaving only a confused Taehyung and a hastily closed door—like he had tried to close it gently, to make as soft a sound as possible, but failed spectacularly—in his wake.

FROM: MINJAE

Minseok is throwing a party, you finally in? ;)

TO: MINJAE

fuck ya

If there's any good thing to have come out of his Macroeconomics lectures, it's the fact that he has found a kindred spirit in Minjae. They'd exchanged numbers and after many nights of blurry selcas and bad puns, Taehyung believes that he has made a grand new friend, one that calls him 'hyung' for once, and is actually lots of fun. Minjae is a Drama major, you see—and for some reason, all the Drama majors seem to be absolute party animals.

This is the third time Minjae has invited him out for a get-together. And since Jimin is insistent on ignoring all his calls and obnoxious Kakaotalk stickers, Taehyung might as well have some fun without him.

It's a Friday night, and Friday night is as Friday night does.

There are already drunken people stumbling around, friends with arms slung around each other as they giggle their way through the traffic. Queues for the few popular clubs are already snaking down the road, and cigarettes litter the street corners even more than they usually do.

Minseok, as it turns out, does not throw house parties. He throws *club* parties—apparently he's some rich hotshot, co-owning a club somewhere in Hongdae. Taehyung has no clue where it is, and he stands in the middle of Hongdae, trying to Naver maps his way around the place. The address Minjae had texted him was as vague as it could get: *the coke machine by the mandu shop*, as if that would actually lead Taehyung anywhere.

“Hyung, where are you?” Minseok's voice floats in from the other end of the call. “You gotta be here by eleven sharp, we're on Minseok's guest list.”

“There are no coke machines anywhere!” Taehyung hisses. He looks around him—nope, no mandu shops or coke machines in sight. “Come get me, please.”

“Okay, okay, hold on. Where are you at?”

“Uh, next to *seolbing*?”

“Don't move, I'm coming.”

Sure enough, in five minutes, Minjae shows up. He's decked out surprisingly casually given the fact that he'd said it was a 'really cool, fancy new club', just tight jeans, a t-shirt tucked into the waistband and a leather jacket thrown over his shoulders. Well, Taehyung can't say much himself—he's in his standard loose pants, sneakers and sweater, the default uniform for whatever occasion, even for a party at some fancy club.

“I thought you said it was a nice place,” Taehyung comments, as they make their way through some alley or another.

“If it were actually nice, I wouldn't have invited you,” Minjae replies, smirking.

He stops right in front of a mandu shop. Lo and behold, next to it is a coke vending machine, one of those old style ones with the fancy retro lettering. Taehyung is about to ask what on earth is going on, when Minjae steps forward, pulls on a knob, and the vending machine literally swings open to reveal an entrance right behind it.

What the fuck?

“Welcome to Secret Society,” Minjae says, bowing ninety degrees.

Taehyung has to be dragged in, still in a state of semi-shock and wonder—seriously, who would have thought there'd be a *secret entrance*, it's like all his childhood dreams come true—by Minjae, the rather mean-looking bouncer drilling daggers into the back of his head as he moves in.

The club is small and cosy but even at eleven, there's already a crowd. People lean up against the bar, downing shot after shot as the bartender darts along the counter, slamming glasses down with mind-boggling speed. It's smoky and lights are flashing and Taehyung can barely breathe properly. It's all smoke and musk and alcohol, people tripping over each other as they try pushing themselves toward the dance floor.

He finds a glass shoved into his hand, and when he turns to look, Minjae smiles at him.

“You need to loosen up.”

Taehyung wants to reply. He wants to pull his lips back and scrunch

his nose and say that he doesn't need it, he downs soju like plain water on every other night. But there's no point, is there?

"Damn, that was straight vodka," Minjae whistles, impressed.

Like many other Friday nights, what follows after the first shot is more than a bit of a blur.

At some point during the night, Taehyung has taken enough shots for a permanent burn to linger in his throat. He's talked to enough people to remember no one's names, and he barely takes notice of the act on stage, a rapper duo of some sort. They're pretty good, he vaguely registers in the back of his alcohol-addled brain. But he can't really be bothered to care. Not when he feels loose and feather-light and the flashing lights make him happy, the smoke makes him happy, and someone's arm is sneaking around his waist as he laughs into said person's neck, mouths at the skin and tastes salt and sweat.

"Hold up there," the person laughs. Taehyung tilts his head up to catch an expanse of smooth, pale skin (like Jeongguk's) and a sharp jawline (like Jeongguk's). He tries to ignore the way his heart falls when he realises it's Minjae that he's currently wrapped around. "You're drunk."

"So?" It comes out more like a whine laced on a pout, and Taehyung begins to question if he's even a hyung to begin with. What makes someone a hyung? What if Minjae is the hyung? What if *Jeongguk* is the hyung? He tugs on Minjae's sleeve. "Dance with me."

"I'm drunk but not that drunk," Minjae says, voice quiet. Concerned, restrained, but not biting at all. "You'll end up doing something you regret."

Taehyung snuffles. "Fine, I'll find someone else then."

Right as he's about to let go of Minjae and step into the crowd, maybe find someone who is actually willing to dance with him unlike a certain spoilsport, a firm hand grasps his wrist. His eyes dart back immediately and sure enough, it's Minjae. There's a look of resignation in his eyes as he lets out a sigh. Grabs Taehyung's waist with his other hand. Leads him onto the dance floor, hands still on Taehyung, secure and warm and—maybe it's not what he set out for tonight, Taehyung thinks, but it sure feels *nice*. And that's all he really needs right now.

It's not exactly dancing music. The track that's playing right now is

some kind of hip hop (probably a Zico track since everyone and their mum sucks Zico's dick these days, Taehyung thinks) and the performers have long since finished their set. It's not exactly dancing music, but it's fast enough and intense enough that Taehyung can get excited and hyped up and it's not long before he begins dancing absolutely everywhere.

"Taehyung, calm down a bit," Minjae urges, even as he stumbles a bit in a bid to grab onto Taehyung. Looks like someone isn't as sober as they seem either. "You don't wanna get burned by anyone's cig."

"Where's the hyung?" Taehyung jabs sarcastically.

"Taehyung- *hyung* , please calm down," Minjae says. He rolls his eyes and grabs onto Taehyung's elbow and guides them to the edge of the dance floor. Then he frowns and asks, "Why are you so off today?"

"Off?" Taehyung asks. He's tired from dancing, and the wall looks very inviting right now, so he leans against it like a rag doll. "What do you mean?"

"Like there's something on your mind."

"There isn't anything on my mind."

"Well, then." Minjae bites his lip and it's—it's uncharacteristic, that's what it is, the darting eyes and the lip-biting and the telltale nervous tick of his jaw. Minjae is never jittery nerves, Minjae is always quiet confidence and subdued charisma. "Like there's someone on your mind."

Taehyung freezes up. Something has struck a chord and he doesn't want to admit it, he really doesn't, but there's no helping the way his eyes widen and his mouth clamps shut. But for all his astuteness, Minjae doesn't seem to notice it.

And so, Taehyung reacts the only way he knows how: by grabbing another bottle of soju and downing it as quickly as possible.

It's not long before alcohol fogs up his mind again, and this time, in the back of his mind, there's an inkling that he might regret this at some point. But he's grinding up against Minjae—Minjae, with pale skin and jawline and he might not have doe eyes or a nose too big for his face, but it's alright—and the younger seems to reciprocating, digging a knee between Taehyung's thighs. Because this is Minjae—this is Minjae, not Jeongguk, and the warmth from before felt amazing

and Taehyung would give anything to feel it again.

Taehyung presses his mouth to Minjae's and really, he just wanted a simple kiss, but a tongue makes its way in and before long he's groaning and there's something poking against his hip.

He moves his lips down to Minjae's ear, pinching the single lone stud between his teeth, and asks, "Do you want to go back to my place?"

The grin that spreads across Minjae's face almost makes Taehyung forget everything he's done and everything he's about to do.

Taehyung wakes up to the afternoon sun blinding him even through closed eyelids and a text from Minjae. A short one, one that simply says *'Thanks for the good night hyung! I left early for class, see you in stats'*. His stomach clenches—maybe it's guilt, maybe it isn't, but he doesn't particularly regret it. Maybe it's shitty of him to *not* feel anything after having a one-night stand with a new friend, one that you want to keep around. But then again, Minjae doesn't sound particularly annoyed or frustrated or nervous, so perhaps he's as detached as Taehyung is, and Taehyung can push this particular problem to the back of his mind.

There are more pressing issues at hand. Mainly: the look on Jeongguk's face as Taehyung steps out of his bedroom, too tired and worn out and hungover to throw a shirt on, hair and face an absolute wreck. Or rather, it's the *lack* of a look that's creeping Taehyung out.

"Morning," he croaks out. Because hungover he might be, but rude he is certainly not.

"There's toast in the oven," Jeongguk replies. His voice is small and Taehyung suspects he hears a waver, but he chalks it up to post-alcohol hallucinations.

"Thanks," Taehyung mutters.

His mouth is really, really dry right now. He can't say much without feeling the cracks forming in his throat and everything feels like absolute fire, like sandpaper grating against his insides. And he's about to make a grab for a jug of water when Jeongguk places a glass

right in front of him.

Taehyung looks up. He wants to thank Jeongguk—and really, in this state, he would do anything. Thank him. Hug him. A kiss on the cheek. A blowjob under the dinner table. (Okay, that one’s a bit much.) But he can’t see much beyond the curtain of hair that’s fallen in front of Jeongguk’s doe eyes, dark brown bangs that sweep across his forehead and from this angle, Taehyung can’t read anything. Maybe that’s the point. Maybe he hates Taehyung so much that he can’t even bear to look at Taehyung.

“Who was that last night?”

The words are barely a whisper. Taehyung wouldn’t have caught them at all if he hadn’t been looking at how Jeongguk’s lips moved, how they barely moved at all. It’s so uncharacteristically shy of the usually outwardly antagonistic boy that Taehyung’s already-throbbing head is even more confused.

“What?” It’s the only response Taehyung can come up with.

Jeongguk clears his throat, and his voice is louder this time. Almost audible. “The guy who left your room this morning. Tall, black jacket. Deep voice.”

“Oh, that was Minjae,” Taehyung says. “A friend.”

Jeongguk looks up and Taehyung’s heart stills. He looks up at Taehyung through wide eyes and looks uncannily like a wounded puppy, one who’s biting his lower lip so hard Taehyung is afraid that Jeongguk will draw blood.

Taehyung doesn’t speak much to Minjae outside of class after that night. It’s not that he hasn’t tried—it’s that Minjae is genuinely busy, Business majors have presentation after presentation, and more often than not when he texts Taehyung it’s to complain about his groupmates’ lack of competency. Taehyung enjoys these texts. He laughs at them, replies with Ryan stickers that send him into a fit of giggles.

It’s a free night again. There’s no class for the next few days because

of some holiday or another, and Jimin apparently decided that everyone should crash Taehyung's apartment because "you owe us for all those Camels we bummed you", as if that were a legitimate reason. As if he had all but forgotten the fight they'd had the other day, the one that relegated Taehyung to the sidelines for a while and led to him beating himself up for hours and days on end. But this is what Jimin is like, Taehyung knows. He pushes and pulls and sometimes he lets go, but he never quite forgets, and you can't do much other than accept what you get. Besides, with alcohol and cigarettes, you forget what has happened. It's in the past.

And as much as Taehyung would rather hang out by the Han River with a few boxes of fried chicken and some beer, even he has to admit that the weather is getting too cold. It's too cold, it's too windy. Up here in Seoul, the transition to winter is fast and brutal.

"Some of my friends are coming over later," Taehyung says out loud. It's early evening and Jeongguk's bumming around at their apartment—Taehyung wishes that the boy had gone out instead, headed to a party and crashed there for the rest of the night, instead of having to awkwardly introduce Jeongguk to his friends. "Just so you know."

"Alright," Jeongguk replies, shrugging.

They haven't spoken much since that night, but Jeongguk's out of character behaviour has since faded, and it's like he had never been vulnerable to begin with. Like he had never been soft. Now, it's back to apathetic shrugs and monosyllabic answers and, on good days, a one to two-minute long conversation.

Night arrives soon and if there's one thing Taehyung realises, it's this: Jimin can and will become friends with anyone. And this very, very long list includes his stepbrother.

Everyone is here, all six of them. They're halfway through their respective bottles of soju but it hasn't quite hit anyone yet—everyone is still too sober, too coherent, though Taehyung knows that it will change after either twenty minutes or a few drags. But Jimin—Jimin is the one that offers Jeongguk a drink. He gets up from his seat and walks slowly, carefully, to the closed door and raps twice. Taehyung's eyes are glued the entire time, and when Jeongguk finally comes out with a bottle of soju in hand, it's a wonder Taehyung doesn't burn from Jeongguk's gaze.

"Jeongguk, right?" Namjoon asks. He's leaning back into the chair,

nursing a beer instead of soju. Heathen. Taehyung believes wholeheartedly in the phrase ‘go hard or go home’, and he’d told Namjoon that before they started drinking, but was only met with a smack to the back of his head courtesy of Seokjin. “I’m Namjoon. PhD student, Physics.”

Jeongguk nods, introduces himself in a strong voice more characteristic of that cocky asshole persona he likes to pull on whenever it’s someone new. Just one of the small things, Taehyung notices. Small things, like talking louder and raising his brow and smirking every so often.

Everyone introduces themselves, and if there’s a second thing Taehyung realises: Jeongguk is pretty chill.

Taehyung doesn’t know whether it’s the alcohol, or the frequent smoke breaks they take, talking in low, murmured voices. Or maybe it’s the lame puns that Hoseok brings up, or the way Jimin stumbles each time they walk to the stairwell to have a few puffs, giggling as he almost burns himself. But Jeongguk smiles a lot more (he kind of looks like a bunny when he does, all round cheeks and bright eyes) and he’s looser. He talks more than he has in the past months that Taehyung has known him, and the knowledge stabs Taehyung in the heart a little bit. Just a little bit.

“Nah, Chemistry’s great,” Jeongguk says. His shoulders, tense at first, are now relaxed as he digs them into the wall of the stairwell. Tilts his head backward to watch the smoke chase from his lips. “The central science and all that.”

“I’m a Dance major, don’t know shit about Chemistry,” Hoseok replies.

It’s nice, that’s what it is. This heady feeling of lightness, like everything is floating and everything is good. The only thing is that Jeongguk has been talking to every single person except for Taehyung and it’s making him feel more than a little miffed.

“Let’s go back inside,” Taehyung snaps.

He can’t help it. When he’s like this, he doesn’t have as tight of a rein over his emotions—but drugged up on alcohol, the only one who really notices it is Jimin. And even though they’re kind of cool now, Taehyung still remembers the stark memory of the quarrel and well, the thing about Taehyung is that he holds grudges.

So when Jimin places a hand on his forearm, a sign of warning and concern rolled into one, he brushes it off and stubs his cigarette and heads back in.

Fuck, he's being petty now, isn't he?

No, you're being jealous, a voice that sounds suspiciously like Seokjin in Mum Mode calls out in his head. He smacks it down immediately. He's not jealous. Not one bit. Why would he even be jealous? He's not close to Jeongguk anyway, they might live together and they might be stepbrothers (even if none of his friends know) and he might highkey want to bone Jeongguk, but those are not valid reasons. Not at all.

He sinks into the couch and buries his face into his hands.

"Are you okay?" Seokjin asks. He doesn't smoke, refuses to touch a single cigarette after he got addicted back in high school and weaned himself off of it over his undergraduate years, and he'd stayed indoors while the rest chilled outside. "You look kinda pale."

"It's alright, hyung. I'm fine."

"You don't look fine to me," Seokjin chides. "No more alcohol for you."

Taehyung merely sighs. He's only had a bottle of soju so far and he's already feeling light-headed, but he knows that it's only midnight and as the night wears on, the high will fade. Maybe he can sneak a few bottles later, when Seokjin is too busy making out with Namjoon in their drunken haze (it's a thing that happens whenever the two PhD students are too boozed up, and the rest don't bother questioning it any more) to notice that Taehyung's snuck off and bought a few bottles.

The thing about nights like these is that they don't always start and end the way Taehyung expected. The previous time, they'd crashed the playground and Hoseok fell asleep too early and instead of taking over the streets like he had desperately needed to, instead of using the fake, temporary high of adrenaline to get his mind off his stepbrother, the six of them brought the sleeping dancer home and went back to their respective dorms. And Taehyung—he hadn't been drunk enough, hadn't been sober enough, and was left alone with his thoughts.

This night—it started off easy enough, but then Jeongguk had entered and he'd been riled up and even if his body feels looser, his mind doesn't feel the same. His body is slow and lethargic and everything

feels heavy, the air above him is a thousand tonnes, but he's ever more conscious of the way both he and Jeongguk are splayed across the couch, legs almost overlapping, heads knocking against each other. He is hyper-aware, he needs to fucking *move away, fucking hell*, but his body doesn't cooperate—it's slow and lethargic and everything feels heavy, and he wants nothing more than to anchor himself to anywhere but Jeongguk's ribcage.

"There's nothing good on Netflix," Taehyung whines. Too loudly, it seems, since Jeongguk bristles, body shifting enough for his bare skin to brush against Taehyung's. In the back of his mind, the sole sober voice is wondering why the hell isn't Jeongguk moving away, why isn't *Taehyung* moving away?

"We're gonna go first," Hoseok says, ignoring the war waging in Taehyung's head. He grabs a sleeping Jimin and a half-conscious Yoongi with a hand each and hauls them up from the couch. "See you, Taehyung."

The farewell that leaves Taehyung's lips is so soft he barely catches it himself.

Now, it's just the two of them, with the three flatmates gone and Namjoon and Seokjin having left earlier to "finish up that fucking thesis, fucking hell". Taehyung and Jeongguk. Stepbrother and stepbrother. Both lying across that ratty couch the previous tenants had left behind for good reason, Taehyung's head on one end and Jeongguk's on the other, legs tangling in the middle but not quite—because as drunk as Taehyung is, he's still sober enough to try his absolute best to avoid that feeling of heat, almost an electric shock, that shoots up his spine when they touch.

"Hey, Tae," Jeongguk calls out. His voice is weak and hoarse and Taehyung tries to forget about how it sounds like a moan. "What time is it?"

"I dunno," Taehyung groans in reply. He throws a hand over his eyes. "Get your dick off my foot."

"Get your foot off my dick," Jeongguk snaps back.

Taehyung is doing his best, he really is, but he can't help thinking about what Jeongguk's got underneath those sweatpants when said thing is *poking into his foot*. Ever since he'd pushed Jeongguk against the wall and the younger had done the same back to him, his emotions have been a mess. Alcohol should have made it better.

Alcohol would have made it better, if not for the fact that this was Jeon fucking Jeongguk, and he seems to have a talent for messing up everything in Taehyung's life, including this constant need to map the veins on Jeongguk's neck with his tongue.

Maybe not just Jeongguk's neck. Taehyung sneaks a peek at Jeongguk, tilts his head up for a better view, and is met with a strip of skin and a hint of a six pack. (How the *hell* does a Chemistry major at Yonsei have time to work out?) Okay. Definitely not just the neck, then.

"Was that your fwb?"

"Minjae?" Taehyung asks. Why's he asking about Minjae at a time like this? He's a mess and it's late and they're *alone* and Taehyung has got soon-to-be-expired lube in his second drawer, Jeongguk should be writhing underneath him, not asking about Minjae. "No, he's just a friend."

A pause. "Didn't look like it, though." Jeongguk sounds contemplative. "He looked really fucking happy when he was leaving, even gave me the stinkeye when he walked past."

"Maybe you're just a naturally hateable person," Taehyung comments, laughing. It's Minjae. There's no way Minjae would like him romantically. Platonically, definitely, Taehyung has lots of platonic feels to give; Minjae's a great friend a decent lay. That's all there is to it. He's sure. "He's just a friend. Don't think I'll ever have non-friend relationships."

"Non-friend?"

"Non-friend," Taehyung nods. "Like that hand-holding, flowers on Valentine's, kiss me under the stars kinda thing. Not for me."

"You don't strike me as that kind of person." Jeongguk's a lot more talkative now. He's a lot nicer. He's almost as nice as he was with Taehyung's friends, and the thought makes something warm bloom in Taehyung's chest. "I thought you'd be all up for the straight-laced, cutesy romantic shit."

"Wow, we're veering into deep territory here," Taehyung whistles. He should mind. He should mind, because he doesn't really talk about himself, much less with a stepbrother he doesn't really talk about anything to in the first place, but strangely enough, he can't bring himself to. "But no, not really for me. Hookups are great though. Ten out of ten would recommend."

When Jeongguk doesn't reply after a few seconds, Taehyung asks, "What, you've never had a hookup?"

"Well, no," Jeongguk replies, flustered. Taehyung sits up and leans forward, rests his arms on folded knees and peers over Jeongguk, whose face is slowly but surely turning a bright shade of tomato red. "Not really. Not ever."

"You're fucking lying," Taehyung cackles. He eyes Jeongguk's body appreciatively and makes sure the younger knows it—he can feel the burn of embarrassment practically radiating from Jeongguk at this point, and for some reason, the knowledge that he has managed to make Jeongguk feel this way makes him all the more happier. Jeongguk's got a dancer's body, not as lithe as Hoseok's or as small as Jimin's, but still long and slim, shoulders just slightly broad and a thin waist flaring out to prominent hips, thick thighs that would look really, really fucking good around Taehyung's neck—

Taehyung gulps. "Looking like that? No way."

"Holy fuck," Jeongguk gasps. He genuinely looks floored. He pushes himself up onto his elbows and a Taehyung lets out a barely-there whimper of regret when the t-shirt rights itself and covers up Jeongguk's torso. "Was that an actual compliment?"

"Please," Taehyung scoffs. He's still trying to keep the image of being choked by Jeongguk's thighs out of his mind. "I'm the one who should be surprised that you're even talking to me."

"You will only ever hear this from me now, and that's because I'm too drunk to get off this couch," Jeongguk says, utterly serious. Brows knitted and mouth tight and eyes piercing. "I am... emotionally constipated."

Taehyung laughs, a hearty one that makes his stomach and jaw hurt. "Anyone who's been around you for two minutes can see that. Hell, even *Yoongi-hyung*, grump of grumps, noticed it."

They end up talking for a bit more after that, and it's nice. It keeps Taehyung's mind off unproductive things. The conversation is surprisingly easy even though it's his emotionally constipated stepbrother that Taehyung's talking to, and at some point they're so tired and their voices drift off and they slump onto the couch, legs tangling for real this time.

Taehyung falls asleep thinking about how they actually talked in more

than just single syllables and curt sentences and how much he liked it, and if Jeongguk notices the boner that both of them are sporting in the morning, he doesn't say anything about it either.

Somehow, Jeongguk worms his way into Taehyung's little ragtag group of friends. After that night, things were a lot smoother between them. The previous animosity is still lingering there, hanging like an unspoken knot, but it's temporarily forgotten for the sake of company and, for Taehyung, at least, a strong dislike for conflict. He's glad. He's glad that Jeongguk greets him with actual smiles and proper sentences, ones that don't have an undertone of sarcasm.

So it's no surprise when the next Friday night finds both of them at a club. Taehyung and Jeongguk are the only undergraduates in the whole group, and between the other five, they know the entire campus, which explains how easily they've managed to get VIP tickets into this particular place. Hoseok had run up to Taehyung after his Statistics class, a bright grin on his face (not unusual) and a black envelope in his hand (very unusual), and asked him to show up at Itaewon on Friday night with Jeongguk and "for the love of fashion, wear something *without* holes".

"One more shot!" Hoseok calls out. It's just him here today, no Jimin or Yoongi or Namjoon. He's a little off today—still happy, still smiling, but not as bright. A little duller, just very slightly grey. Seokjin is here to chaperone him though, follows a few steps behind Hoseok wherever he goes, and Taehyung is grateful for that; he's not the most eloquent person when drunk, he'd hardly be able to take care of his friend.

"Take it easy, Hobi-hyung," Jeongguk says. Taehyung lets out a small scoff, since Jeongguk's had about three shots of vodka within the hour and he's barely steady on his feet. He's met with a well-deserved glare for that.

"It's alright, you kids go have fun." Seokjin waves them away. "I'm the Mandatory Mother tonight."

"Aren't you always?" Hoseok grins. He accepts the shot from the bartender ("It's on the owner's tab, drink as much as you want tonight!") and downs it in two seconds.

“I’m gonna go dance,” Taehyung says to Jeongguk, who’s glaring at the menu like he’s seriously considering another jagerbomb. “Gukkie, no more alcohol for you. I’m going to the first level, call me when you wanna go back. Or if you find a hookup,” Taehyung wiggles his eyebrows and Jeongguk suppresses a laugh, eyes smiling but mouth tight, “just text me. So I know to leave the door unlocked.”

“Alright,” Jeongguk says, and although he still doesn’t talk as much as Taehyung would like him to (at least, not when sober), at least he has a smile on his face, as small and tight as it is.

Taehyung has no idea who owns this club, and he’s not particularly interested, but it’s large and fancy and has two levels and there’s free flow of booze courtesy of Hoseok’s Connections, so he’s not in a position to question anything. The music is decent—the DJ for tonight is someone he’s heard from somewhere, the way the music transitions from beat to beat is similar, and the crowd is getting hyped enough that even he knows whoever’s up there on the podium has skills.

And he knows he looks good, too, if the hands brushing his waist and the gazes dragging their way up and down his body are anything to go by. A sweater and leather pants that make his legs look miles long might not be standard clubbing attire, but fuck if he’s gonna freeze his ass off. The small but round ass, smudged eyeliner and bedroom eyes are all he really needs to draw attention.

He’s dancing on his own in the middle of the floor when a body sidles up behind him. Hands snake their way around his waist, resting on the jut of his hipbones, and the stranger’s breath is hot against his neck.

“Taehyung,” the stranger says.

Then it hits Taehyung—it’s not a stranger, it’s Kim fucking Minjae, good friend and one-time hookup. He immediately peels himself away from Minjae and turns around, and, truth be told, he expected anything other than what he sees—a flash of anger across Minjae’s handsome face, nostrils slightly flared and jaw clenched, before it gives way to a neutral expression.

“Minjae,” Taehyung says. His voice is tight but it’s loud enough in the club that the tension wouldn’t be noticed. “What’re you doing here?”

“Just having fun,” Minjae replies.

He’s nonchalant. He’s *too* nonchalant, he’s putting on airs. (Taehyung

knows this. He's done it often enough.) And Taehyung is about to slide away, to find a potential hookup, when Minjae grabs his waist and brings him close, bodies and forehead almost touching.

"Same here," Taehyung says. He's trying to smile, but it probably comes out as more of a grimace than anything else. He takes a step to the back, maybe that'll get rid of Minjae, but the other follows him.

"How'd you get in?" Minjae asks. He's polite. He's kind of keeping his distance, but his hands are still around Taehyung's waist, which means there's practically a neon sign of 'VERY NOT AVAILABLE!!!!' flashing above Taehyung's head right now and it's the last thing he wants, because he needs something to get his mind off of how Jeongguk looks in a shirt so thin it's practically see-through and ripped leather pants, and that something is *not* going to be Minjae. It's not going to be a repeat.

"My friend knows the owner," Taehyung says. He moves off to the side in a bid to escape, and Minjae's hand fly off his waist for a millisecond and they're about to fly right back, when someone else catches his shoulders.

"Tae?" Jeongguk asks, hands firm on Taehyung's jacket even after he's spun the older around. "You alright?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," Taehyung says. He's still shocked from Jeongguk literally appearing out of nowhere, but he's good. Better, now that Minjae is further from him. "And you mean Taehyung-*hyung*."

"Hyung, sure," Jeongguk grins. It's not the big one that he flashes when he cracks a particularly stupid joke, the one that makes his cheeks go rounder and his eyes crinkle. It's the small one, barely a tug on the corner of his mouth. He points at Minjae. "And who's this?"

"I'm Minjae." To his credit, Minjae doesn't sound the least bit hostile. Just slightly taken aback and, at the very least, he doesn't sound unfriendly. "Hyung's friend from school."

"I'm Jeongguk, his st—"

"Flatmate," Taehyung interrupts, squeezing Jeongguk's wrist like his life depended on it. He turns to said flatmate and raises his eyebrows pointedly. "Actually, I'm getting kinda tired. Guk-ah, you wanna head back together?"

"Yeah, sure," Jeongguk says. The look on his face is quizzical but he

goes along with it anyway. Good. “See you, Minjae.”

“Hopefully,” Minjae calls out, and he disappears into the background as Taehyung and Jeongguk head out of the club.

“What was that?” Jeongguk asks, the moment they’re out of the club and on a cab back to their apartment. Most of the time, Taehyung prefers to go to Hongdae instead, where he can walk back to his place instead of having to flag down overly-suspicious cab drivers, the kind that sneer at you when they smell the alcohol on your body.

“I don’t really want people to know that we’re stepbrothers,” Taehyung admits, looking away from Jeongguk and out the window. “Only Jimin knows, actually. I dunno. It just feels strange to tell people—”

“No, no, not that,” Jeongguk dismisses hurriedly. “Did he force you to do anything?”

“He didn’t,” Taehyung reassures him. The knot between Jeongguk’s brows is unfamiliar and worrying. “There wasn’t anything. Really.”

“Didn’t look like it from my perspective,” Jeongguk replies, after giving the driver a ten thousand won bill (“You’re paying next time, hyung.”) and exiting the cab.

“And why were you looking?” Taehyung asks, smirking. He steps closer, close enough that he can smell the slight musk of Jeongguk’s cologne—something fresh, not really sweet at all, smells more like the forest than a flower garden—mixed with tobacco and soju. “See something you like?”

“Tae,” Jeongguk groans, right after he gulps nervously and rips his gaze away from Taehyung’s lips. He throws his head backward against the probably very dirty wall he’s leaning against. Maybe if they were more sober Jeongguk wouldn’t be doing this, but Taehyung’s practically revelling in the way he can make Jeongguk respond without even touching him. Then Jeongguk directs his gaze upward (because Taehyung is ever so slightly taller and he will hold that over Jeongguk forever) and glares. “I haven’t had enough alcohol for this.”

“So let’s go get some,” Taehyung says, shrugging. He’s less than a palm’s length away from Jeongguk and he can’t help but reach up to stroke the younger’s neck—it’s right there, it’s exposed and it’s smooth and it’s beautiful—as he pulls Jeongguk away from the wall. “It’s Friday night, we’re in Hongdae, and we’re already halfway to hell.”

“The second half of a race is always the hardest,” Jeongguk says, and Taehyung vaguely wonders if all the time Jeongguk has spent with Namjoon is finally getting to him in the form of inappropriately philosophical comments.

“Doesn’t matter,” Taehyung replies, a wicked grin in his eyes as he heads into the nearest convenience store, intent on more than a few bottles. “We’re probably not gonna remember it anyway.”

fall 2015, iii

Chapter Summary

this is the reason why rating and tags have been 'upgraded', vmin
bfff talk, taekook tries to talk but not rly. this chapter is for u
filthy sinners

“Like I said—it’s Friday night, we’re in Hongdae, and we’re already halfway to hell.”

“No, we’re actually *in* hell. Tell me again—why are we back on campus?”

Taehyung sniffs. “*Rude.*”

Fine, so this may not have been the best idea he’s ever had, but anyone will agree that it is hard to top that one time he’d managed to dye Jimin’s hair red while the dancer was sleeping, sprayed over it with temporary black hair dye and cackled as the black colour drained away in the wash, leaving a shocked and screaming Jimin to curl up in the shower. (Taehyung will forever be amazed at how his best friend sleeps like a dead log.) Besides, hardly anyone comes up with decent outing suggestions more than three-quarters through a bottle of fresh soju.

For some fucked up reason, they’ve found themselves halfway across the courtyard of Yonsei University. If he squints, Taehyung can see the building that houses his Econometrics classes from here. A bottle of unopened soju in his hand and a boy who radiates electricity with each step by his side, and that is really all he needs.

The world is not as steady any longer. He feels light. Each step is not just forward but to the side, too, by just the slightest bit. It’s dark on the campus, and he can only see because of the few lamps left on for the sake of all-nighters and the moon and stars hanging in the sky.

“Seriously,” Jeongguk repeats, and his voice is quieter now. Lower, deeper, like he’d put all of himself into these few syllables and coloured it grey, “Why are we back here?”

“I dunno,” Taehyung admits.

He doesn’t know. Maybe it was because they’d been near the

university in the first place. Maybe it was because they had somehow slipped from Hongdae to Sinchon without knowing, the area just as crowded and lively as where they'd been only a few minutes (or hours? days?) before, and he needed to escape. He needed some quiet. He needed some quiet with *Jeongguk* beside him, because the club had been loud and stifling even as he had silently wished for Jeongguk to slide up behind him and grab his waist, and the only place he could think of was the one place in Seoul that would be quiet on a Friday night.

"Come on!" Taehyung shouts, standing at the entrance to one of the buildings. He's pretty sure it leads to the Social Science classrooms, but then again, he is armed with alcohol and not common sense. "Let's go in!"

"Hyung, I don't think this is safe," Jeongguk says slowly, "or legal."

Taehyung lets out a loud, exaggerated sigh and dashes forward to grab Jeongguk's wrist, tugging him toward the glass door. It gives in as easily as it would in the day, but the corridor is completely pitch black and there's nothing except the glare from Jeongguk's phone screen to light their way.

"Where are we going?" Jeongguk breathes. His hand is clutched so tight around Taehyung's that there's sure to be marks the next day.

"Anywhere and everywhere."

The hallway isn't narrow. In fact, the hallway is wide enough for thousands of students to flood through it day in, day out, and yet, with Jeongguk pressed up against his side, hand wrapped in his, Taehyung can barely breathe. It is as if the walls have closed in on him but his chest has opened up and allowed his heart to beat a thousand times harder than before, the rattle in his ribcage something he's wholly unfamiliar with.

Taehyung shakes his head and pushes the way Jeongguk's proximity makes him feel to the back of his mind. There's a door nearby, and he pushes it open. Looks around to make sure that the room is a hundred percent empty before tiptoeing in, Jeongguk trailing behind.

"I bet you've never been to this part of the university before," Taehyung says, a smirk tugging on his mouth. He takes a swig from the bottle and looks at Jeongguk.

"No, I haven't," Jeongguk admits. He paces around the classroom,

enamoured with the posters on the origins of hangeul—and this is how Taehyung knows that the boy is more than slightly gone. “The science campus is all...sciencey.”

Taehyung can't help it. He laughs out loud, laughs so hard that his stomach collapses in on itself and it hurts, it really hurts, and he can't really do anything about it except try to press down that need to grab Jeongguk by the neck and pull him down.

“Come on,” Taehyung prompts, pointing at the bottle Jeongguk is slowly losing grip of. “Drink up.”

Any other time when they're not already dancing under the cloud of alcohol and Jeongguk would have probably said no. Would have probably snapped back in that usual defiant Jeongguk-like way, that he would not under any circumstances take instructions from Taehyung. Hell, even now that they're on speaking terms, Jeongguk still does that. Still seems adamant on reinforcing the fact that he doesn't take orders from anyone, least of all Taehyung.

And yet—there is something in Jeongguk that gives, that caves inward. Taehyung sees this in the way Jeongguk's gaze softens and his shoulders relax, fingers curling tighter around the neck of the glass bottle to bring it up to his lips. In the way his head tips backward to swallow, neck not tense in the slightest, instead giving and caving in.

“Why don't you like me?” Taehyung asks. He figures there's no better time than the present.

Jeongguk splutters. Eyes burning from the alcohol, he replies, “I like—I don't *not* like you.”

“Well, not now,” Taehyung corrects, “but when we first met, you just immediately hated me. I saw it in your eyes. It was pure evil.”

“It wasn't you, you're not so bad,” Jeongguk says. When he sees Taehyung's skeptical look, he adds, “Really. You're a decent hyung.”

“Just decent?”

“Barely breaching top ten. You've got nothing on Yoongi-hyung, sorry.”

“You just say that 'cause he and Namjoon-hyung get you into those hip hop shows for free,” Taehyung replies, genuinely miffed. He folds into himself and sits on the teacher's desk, brings his knees to his

chest and wraps his arms around his kneecaps.

Jeongguk walks over and sits down beside him, feet dangling in the air and palms pressing into the edge of the desk. “No, really. You’re not bad. You’re only gonna hear this once and that’s because I’m not sober so you better perk up those damned unpierced ears.”

“You say ‘unpierced ears’ like that’s a bad thing.”

“It is.”

“That’s only because yours are stretched,” Taehyung pouts. “I bet you got them done because you wanted to rebel and prove that you were your own person in your second year of high school.”

Jeongguk flushes. “That’s not the point. Anyway,” he says, looking down, “I’m sorry for how I acted when we first met. I was a dick.”

“You kinda still are.”

“Whatever,” Jeongguk dismisses. He looks up and their gazes lock. “I’m sorry.”

“Apology accepted. Don’t you love how kind and loving a soul I am?” Taehyung asks, sighing dramatically. He says it like it doesn’t matter, but truth is, there is a slow warmth spreading from his heart to his stomach and out to every nook and cranny of his body, and he wants nothing more than to wrap Jeongguk up in his arms. “You still haven’t told me why you were like that, though.”

“I don’t want to,” Jeongguk says, as if it were as simple as that. He turns away. “I hope you won’t find out, but you probably will, anyway.” He ends with a bitter, mocking laugh, directed more at himself than anything else.

“Why?” Taehyung asks, whining.

Sober, he would probably have his wits about him and caught the cues that Jeongguk really does *not* want to be prodded. But he’s not sober, and that means any and all personal boundaries are gone, which explains the way he’s leaning into Jeongguk, fingers grabbing the younger’s chin to turn his head back toward Taehyung, chest pressing into Jeongguk’s side. He stifles the urge to straddle the younger fully.

“Not gonna say,” Jeongguk mutters. He still refuses to look at Taehyung and Taehyung is slightly put out that he’s the only one who

seems to be affected.

“Fine, be that way,” Taehyung snaps, and he’s the bitter one now. He takes another large gulp from the bottle.

He doesn’t know how long they stay in that empty classroom, but by the time Jeongguk suggests a smoke break, Taehyung is no longer as upset and the bottle is empty. His legs are even more wobbly than before. It feels like the ground beneath his feet has completely vanished and he swears there’s two Jeongguks out to torture him now, not just one.

“I feel so woozy,” Jeongguk sighs. It’s weird. Taehyung has seen Jeongguk buzzed before—tipsy, even—but he was never quite like this. Serious one moment and loose the next. “I feel so happy. So light.”

“That’s what alcohol does, babe,” Taehyung says, and the nickname slips out without warning. Then he laughs, “Oops, sorry. *Babe*.”

“Don’t call me that,” Jeongguk pouts, bristling.

“Why not?” Taehyung mocks. He turns to face Jeongguk, who’s leaning against the wall of some building or another. (Five minutes ago, they had decided to take a break from walking up and down the same goddamn path and ended up here.) Tilts his face to the side. “Do you prefer ‘baby’? What about ‘princess’?”

Jeongguk narrows his eyes at Taehyung, aegysal folding up into his bottom lids and nose scrunching up. The action is so endearing and downright adorable that Taehyung can’t help but reach out and tweak the tip of Jeongguk’s nose.

“Stop that.”

It comes out as a whine instead of a snap, and Jeongguk’s hand shoots out to grab Taehyung’s hand, encasing it in his own palm—Taehyung looks down, and he sees that his own fingers are longer, slimmer, barely able to fit into Jeongguk’s curled fist. The younger’s hand is warm and tight around his own and when he looks back up, Jeongguk is staring right back at him, eyes wide and bright even though it’s dark.

Dark enough that Taehyung can barely see anything. Dark enough that the only thing Taehyung can make out are the blurry edges of Jeongguk’s face where his jawline ends and the air begins, the slope of

his strong nose standing proud against pale skin. How his top lip is barely there, yet juts out when he sucks the bottom one in, hisses in a breath and swallows.

“I’m drunk,” Jeongguk whispers. He closes his eyes as if to steady himself—a breath in, a breath out—eyelashes fluttering against the top of cheekbones, sparse but long.

“You’re drunk,” Taehyung agrees, voice just as soft. This is bad—this is very bad, this is too comfortable and he can’t get too comfortable around the guy he wants to fuck but should never do so, under any circumstances. And so he steps back and digs into his pocket. “Want a smoke?”

“I don’t smoke,” Jeongguk says, words still shaky but louder than before.

Taehyung nods, but he lights up his own cigarette anyway, taking a small puff before exhaling it and allowing a passing idea to implant itself firmly in his mind. It is probably a bad one that will lead to not-very-fun consequences, but fucking hell, he’s going to let himself do something he wants to for once.

“You wanna try?” Taehyung asks.

Jeongguk’s still leaning against the wall. “How?”

Taehyung inhales, takes in a long drag before stepping forward and pressing one hand into the wall beside Jeongguk’s head and using the other to grab the back of Jeongguk’s neck, bringing Jeongguk’s face to his. They’re close, maybe even closer than that one time Taehyung had lost control and slammed Jeongguk into their apartment wall—but this time, it’s not anger that sizzles between them, it’s something tense and unspoken and electric.

As if on instinct, Jeongguk’s mouth falls open and Taehyung brings his own closer, only a few centimeters’ gap between the two. He exhales, the cloud of smoke chasing from his lips and into Jeongguk’s, the younger inhaling everything in like a pro, not coughing or choking or sputtering in the least.

There’s a light thud as Jeongguk’s head tilts backward into the wall, chest falling, and when his eyes open, Taehyung knows that the combination of nicotine and alcohol has gotten to the boy. It’s certainly gotten to Taehyung.

“Good?”

“Yeah, good,” Jeongguk breathes, right against Taehyung’s mouth.

He doesn’t know who is the one that starts it, but Taehyung doesn’t particularly care. Jeongguk’s mouth is impossibly soft against his and he tastes like that one brand of strawberry-flavoured lip balm his ex-roommate used to keep around, except the sweetness now mingles with the taste of tobacco and something vaguely like mint and honey in the background.

He tightens his fingers in Jeongguk’s hair and Jeongguk’s hands are all over—around his waist, then on his neck, then curling around his thin arms and cupping his ass—and he likes it. He likes the way Jeongguk breathes his name when he pulls Jeongguk’s head back to mouth at his neck, he likes the way Jeongguk can wind him tight enough that he’s moaning each time Jeongguk’s touch ghosts across his collarbone, he likes the way he feels like his knees are about to buckle and yet he is still upright, because Jeongguk’s arm is wrapped around his waist and keeps him locked in place.

“Hey, who’s there!” someone shouts, and this is what makes them jump apart like magnets repelling each other.

In any other situation, they would probably have just stayed there—trying to absorb what has happened, catching their breath, fingers flying to swollen lips and messy hair. But they can’t, the security guard’s flashlights are right at their feet, and Jeongguk grabs Taehyung’s hand in a vice-like grip and they hightail the fuck out of there.

By some goddamn miracle, they manage to make it out, sprinting all the way even though the wind is cold and biting against their cheeks and they can barely walk straight as it is, much less run. And yet—they find themselves back in their apartment, both their backs slumped against the locked door, not even bothering to turn on the lights.

“Tae?” Jeongguk asks.

He turns, and Jeongguk is right there as he always is. Leaning against the wooden door, head tilted backward and neck exposed, ribcage still heaving from the sheer intensity of having sprinted all the way from their school back home, a walk that would have usually taken twenty minutes at least. His cheeks are flushed even in the dark and his mouth ever slightly open, jacket falling off his shoulders.

This time, he knows who is the one that starts it, because he's the one who leans forward to grab Jeongguk's face and lock their lips together. The younger lets out a loud groan as Taehyung pushes Jeongguk's jacket completely off the boy's broad shoulders (seriously, where the hell does a Chemistry major find the time to work out?) and shrugs his own off, and now there's barely a couple of layers between the two of them. Their tongues wrap around each other and Taehyung nudges a thigh between Jeongguk's legs, feels the bulge of Jeongguk's hardening cock, and he knows—he knows how lewd it must sound through the thin walls, the sound of mouth against mouth, the groans spilling out from both of them—but he can't bring himself to care.

"Ah, h-hyung," Jeongguk moans, when Taehyung pushes him down onto the couch and mouths at his nipple through the thin white shirt. "Right there."

"You like that?" Taehyung asks. It would be a growl, except it's nowhere near fierce enough, more teasing and playful than aggressive. In the back of his mind, he knows that it's a bad idea—it's a horrible idea, it will come back to bite him in the ass, but for now he can blame it on the alcohol and the fact that it takes two hands to clap. "You're so sensitive."

"Let me—*ah, fuck, Tae*—let me suck you off."

Taehyung pauses. He looks down at Jeongguk splayed across the couch, the very couch they had just been hanging out with their friends on a few days ago, and he thinks he has never seen anything more beautiful.

"Fuck, of course," Taehyung groans.

Both of them know that Taehyung may be taller, but Jeongguk is stronger and could have flipped their positions any time, and this is what he does now. Taehyung falls into the couch and he catches a glimpse of a wicked grin on Jeongguk's mouth right before the younger captures his lips again—and this time, the kiss is hard and fast and bruising, as if Jeongguk wanted to leave his mark before descending down to Taehyung's crotch.

Jeongguk tugs at Taehyung's jeans, the ones that are so tight he has to turn them inside out and roll them on from the ankles.

"So tight," Jeongguk groans, frustrated. He finally pulls down just enough to reveal Taehyung's boxers, and even now he is too lazy to get them off all the way. "At least your ass looks good in them." He

runs a hand down the length of Taehyung's thigh and when Taehyung shudders from that simple touch, he knows that he is whipped. "And your legs, they're so long."

"Next thing you know, you're gonna say how my ears are so big," Taehyung laughs, "and my eyes are so wide and my—*ah, fuck*—"

There's already a tent in Taehyung's boxers and Jeongguk mouths at it through the cloth, brings his lips right over the bulge as another hand tugs the annoying piece of clothing down. He kisses the tip of Taehyung's cock. Slides down and licks the underside in one long, slow motion. Bites the jut of Taehyung's hip. Does everything, except take Taehyung in.

"I thought you said you were gonna suck me off," Taehyung breathes. He digs his fingers into Jeongguk's scalp and pulls and a small, delighted sound escapes from the younger. "Or are you a fucking *tease*?"

"Patience," Jeongguk says, mouth still ghosting against the tip of Taehyung's cock, tongue lapping at the precome.

Then Jeongguk finally swallows Taehyung whole, gaze locked with Taehyung's as his head bobs up and down on Taehyung's cock. And, fuck, Jeongguk looks gorgeous like this, Taehyung thinks—eyes half-lidded, fingernails digging into Taehyung's hip, scrambling for purchase on the small couch, mouth wrapped around Taehyung like he had something to prove.

And Taehyung—he doesn't know how his mind is still coherent, not when all he can feel is Jeongguk's warmth around him. His fingers curl around Jeongguk's hair, all messed up and no longer styled, and Jeongguk hollows his cheeks and Taehyung can't help it, he groans, and he pushes down—

—and Jeongguk chokes, gags the slightest bit.

"Oh, fuck, sorry," Taehyung says hurriedly. He's still rock-hard but he moves, shifts away to give Jeongguk space to catch his breath.

"It's okay," Jeongguk reassures him, voice as hoarse as if he'd just depthroated someone to hell and back.

Then Taehyung notices—Jeongguk's eyes are slightly glazed over, his cock is twitching ever so slightly, his breathing is getting heavier.

Taehyung sucks in a breath. “You like it, don’t you?”

“Like what?” Jeongguk smirks playfully.

“Cockslut,” Taehyung hisses, right before Jeongguk lets out a tinkling laugh and dives back down, and this time he takes Taehyung in all the way to the base—either Jeongguk lacks a gag reflex or he’s really fucking good, there’s no way the boy hasn’t hooked up before, and it’s only a while before Taehyung comes, spilling into Jeongguk’s mouth.

Taehyung is still reeling from the aftereffects of his own orgasm, but he’s not a shitty partner, and he pulls Jeongguk up for a kiss—he can taste himself in Jeongguk’s mouth, salty and slightly bitter, and it’s more than a little lewd but for some reason, he doesn’t mind—hand snaking down to Jeongguk’s erection.

“I want to eat you out,” Taehyung breathes against Jeongguk’s mouth.

Jeongguk nods, eager and urgent.

“On all fours,” Taehyung instructs, and Jeongguk follows promptly, switching their positions so that he plants his shins and forearms on the couch. His ass sticks in the air, ready and waiting, as round as perky as they’d looked in those leather jeans, thin waist flaring out into strong and muscled thighs, and there’s still a part of Taehyung that tells him this will spell out consequences, that there’s no turning back, but he’s too far gone—they’re *both* too far gone.

He licks at Jeongguk’s hole, small and pink, prepped and ready for him. There’s not just his own saliva on it—there is something wet and sticky on there too, like Jeongguk had—

“Did you touch yourself with my come?” Taehyung breathes against Jeongguk’s ass, feeling himself hardening again at the realisation.

Jeongguk lets out a groan and there’s a sound as if he’d buried his head into the couch out of sheer embarrassment. “*Hyung.*”

“You’re going to be the death of me,” Taehyung groans, and he laps at Jeongguk’s hole again, one hand sliding onto Jeongguk’s torso to wrap around his cock, runs it up and down in furious strokes, and the other digging for purchase on Jeongguk’s thigh.

“Fuck, Taehyung, I’m gonna—”

Jeongguk comes, liquid splattering all over his own stomach and some

of it lands on the couch—it's fucking fabric, they're both going to have a hell of a time trying to clean this shit up—the groan from his mouth so loud Taehyung is legitimately worried someone will hear. He looks down—not a surprise that he's gotten hard again, just from getting Jeongguk off, but it's a problem he can settle later. For now:

“Let's get you cleaned up,” Taehyung says.

He gets off the couch and stands up, but Jeongguk is still caught up in the blissful post-orgasm haze, cheeks flushed and chest heaving, forearms straining to support his own weight. Taehyung grabs a towel and rinses it, wrings it to get the excess water out and when he is back, Jeongguk is somewhat more composed. He kneels down on the ground and wipes the come off of Jeongguk's muscled stomach, making sure the boy is clean.

He's almost done, when Jeongguk grabs his wrist. When he looks up, he can't read anything on the younger boy's face.

“What did we just do?” he breathes.

Taehyung gets up and walks away.

Taehyung had thought that the alcohol would dull their memories as much as it heightened their senses. He was very, very wrong.

It's like starting from zero all over again. Going back to the days of quick, stolen glances and a silence hanging in the air, except it is a thousand times worse now, since Taehyung doesn't see Jeongguk around any longer—Jeongguk had bothered to hang around the apartment before, even if he barely spoke a word, his presence a passing shadow at the very least.

When the front door creaks open at eleven or twelve every night, Taehyung rushes out in the coolest, most nonchalant way possible, hoping to talk to Jeongguk in person. But by the time he's pulled on the only half-decent hoodie he owns, Jeongguk is gone and the shower is on and Taehyung is too much of a wimp to do anything else. And in the mornings—the front door opens much too early, early enough that Taehyung doesn't hear a single thing. He's tried texting, too, he's not stupid, but Jeongguk doesn't even grace him with a blue tick beside

the message.

This is how it is. This is how it is for a mere few days, but it's enough to have his forehead in a permanent frown, it's enough for Jimin to notice the change.

"Where's Jeongguk?" Jimin asks through a mouthful of chips. "Usually he'd be hanging all over you by now."

Taehyung pauses. "He's, uh, been busy. Hasn't been around the house much lately either."

"You're lying," Jimin frowns, and Taehyung knows there's a reason Jimin is his best friend. He knows Taehyung like the back of his hand. "What's going on?"

"If I tell you, then you have to tell me what's happening with you, Yoongi-hyung and Hoseok-hyung." Taehyung knows he has no way out of it. Jimin knows, and Jimin will prod and pry till Taehyung gives, with or without alcohol.

Jimin is a good friend to Taehyung. The best friend, the bestest of best. The ketchup to his mustard, the bread to his butter, the Simon D to his Gray. This is why he knows that there's no way out of it, that if Jimin could have it his way, he'd dodge and hide until everything was all but forgotten. He'd pretend no argument, as small and fleeting as it may have been, had ever happened, and would gently push Taehyung along his merry way. But Taehyung has known Jimin for far too long to fall for that trick again, and he's certain that the only way to get Jimin to talk, like best friends should, is to confront everything head-on, even if that means revealing his own wounds.

But he can see the hesitation in Jimin's face. It's in the way he chews on his bottom lip and knits his brows together, curls his palms into fists and digs fingernails into the heel of his hand. A few long seconds pass before Jimin nods.

"Okay, fine," Jimin sighs.

And it seems like fate really enjoys making a fool out of Taehyung and everyone else around him, because right then, Yoongi and Hoseok slide onto the bench without so much as a warning.

"Oh my god," Taehyung groans, tilting his head backward to look into the sky. "And it was just getting good."

“Nah, it’s fine,” Jimin dismisses. “I got mad and it was my fault but we sorted it out anyway. The three of us are together now.”

“Together?” Taehyung asks, puzzled. “Like, *together* together?”

“Uh, yeah,” Jimin answers, cheeks red. Yoongi’s face is expressionless as always and Hoseok’s face turns as white as a sheet, before he turns to Jimin with a look of ‘what the fuck is going on and why are you telling him this’. The only reply he gets from Jimin is a half-hearted shrug and a weak grin.

“Oh.” Taehyung slumps backward into the bench. Out of all the things that could have happened when boyfriends of two years Yoongi and Jimin moved in with their childhood friend Hoseok, he’d never expected *this* . “Okay.”

He’s...surprised, he admits, but it’s not something he opposes, even if it’s not something he sees often. Jimin looks happy and so do Yoongi and Hoseok and that’s all he really needs, it’s none of his business, but he can tell from the way that Jimin’s hands are still wrung together that *he* certainly is worried. Jimin still refuses to look at Taehyung, instead drilling his gaze into the ground—Yoongi’s got a hand on his thigh and Hoseok has one on the back of his neck, massaging it softly, and Taehyung thinks that this—this is good, Jimin is in good hands.

“You know I don’t care, right?” Taehyung whispers, leaning forward. “I’m happy for you guys.”

“But it’s just not something that *happens* ,” Jimin whines. His bottom lip is jutting out now and his eyes are shining. “This isn’t normal. People don’t do this, everyone’s gonna stare. It’s so weird saying it out loud to someone else.”

“Then fuck those who stare.” Taehyung looks to Yoongi and Hoseok and brands them with a glare, telepathically sending the warning that he will fuck them up if they ever dare fuck Jimin up. He hopes Yoongi’s nose scrunch and Hoseok’s raised brows mean that they’ve received the message. “It doesn’t matter what people think as long as you’re happy, alright?”

“Sure,” Jimin replies, but he still sounds wholly unconvinced.

“Look, I don’t know what happened between you guys a while ago and how serious it was for you to snap at me,” Taehyung begins, “and I’m your best friend and I’ll admit, I’m still curious. But I know you well enough that you need your space and when you’re ready to tell

me what happened, I'm here. I will always be here, okay? As long as you're happy, fuck what others think."

It's silent for a bit. Yoongi and Hoseok seem to know that this isn't the time to interrupt, it's Jimin and Taehyung's time to talk it out, and they sit back, hands falling away from Jimin, shoulders still tense.

And on his part, Jimin finally looks up. The look on his face is no longer one of fear or hesitation, he looks—he simply looks sad, a little doubtful yet a little hopeful, like he wants desperately to cling on to Taehyung's words yet can't find it in himself to do so.

But finally—fucking finally, he speaks, "Thanks, Taehyung. I'll try." He musters a laugh. It's weak and barely makes it through the air, but it's there. "Now, you tell me what's going on with *you*."

"Maybe when your bodyguards aren't here," Taehyung teases playfully, now that the atmosphere's lightened up.

The four of them end up going for lunch together, Jimin warning Taehyung that he'll pry it out of him sooner or later, and it's nice that nothing much has changed. The fact that three of his best friends have just gotten together still lingers there, and Taehyung will attest that he's still a little shocked, but the dynamics are more or less the same—Hoseok orders everything for them with a smile, Yoongi pays with a sigh, and Jimin and Taehyung are off in the background throwing curly fries at each other.

And when Jimin finally gets to talk to Taehyung, it's already evening and Yoongi's off for a show and Hoseok has a dance class to teach. They're out here now, just the two of them—and it's been a while, Taehyung thinks. It's been a while since it was just the two best friends.

"So, are you ready to tell me what's going on?"

"We made out," Taehyung admits. "And I liked it."

"I know I told you that you were thirsty," Jimin says, "but I didn't think you'd actually act on it. You do know that you're legally related—or, at least, you're about to be—right?"

"You think I don't?" Taehyung snaps. "It's just...I want to talk to him about it, but he keeps avoiding me and he never answers my texts or calls. You'd think living in the same house, we can at least sort something out. But *no*," he sneers, "he just has to go and run from all

his fucking problems as if he's the only one who has them."

"Just give him a bit of time?" Jimin is trying, Taehyung will give him that. "Not everyone can confront their problems as easily as you do."

"I don't know," Taehyung groans. He slumps forward in his bed and belly-flops onto the mattress. "I just wish he'd talk to me. I swear I won't try anything. Just talking."

"I won't be so sure about that," Jimin snickers. He grabs a pillow and throws it at Taehyung's head. Then he perks up, "You know what you need? A new hairstyle."

"A new hairstyle?"

"A new hairstyle."

"Bro."

"*Bro.*"

Exactly four hours later, it's one in the morning and Jimin's just left after patting himself on the back for a job well done (who actually pats themselves on the fucking back? Park Jimin, that's who) and Taehyung is left alone, blow-drying the shit out of his newly bleached hair. The cut is almost exactly the same as what he'd had before, a simple almost-bowl cut grown out of laziness and lack of care, but the colour is now even lighter than his skin tone, a sandy blond that Jimin swears makes him glow. Taehyung doubts it, but, as with all things, he'll give it a shot.

Of course, as luck would have it, the front door creaks open just as he finishes with his hair—it's dry now, perhaps even *too* dry because of the bleach, but it's a complete mess, as all his attempts with personal grooming tend to turn out.

"Hyung," Jeongguk yelps. He's completely drenched, shirt sticking to skin and hair plastered to his forehead, and Taehyung has to gather himself—once to check if it is raining outside (nope, it's not), and another time to tear his eyes away from the outline of Jeongguk's abs through the thin shirt (fuck, had he been working out?).

“Jeonggukkie,” Taehyung nods. He throws the hairdryer to a corner (okay, fine, he places it down carefully because he is *not* about to be electrocuted by a portable, glorified fan) and clears his throat. Act as natural as possible, Taehyung. Come on. You can do this. “So, you just came from the gym?”

“Uh, no,” Jeongguk says. Each word is careful and calculated, like he’s walking on eggshells. “From the studio. Dance practice.”

Taehyung wants to laugh, but he knows that no one will take kindly to it. He’s in his boxers and a ratty Ghibli sweater, hair a complete mess and a new colour to boot; Jeongguk’s just back from practice and in desperate need of a shower, and it’s just all so *strange*. Neither of them is dressed for a Serious Talk and there is something about talking to someone for the first time in days, someone whom you live with, someone who makes you fumble and trip over all the syllables that usually grace your tongue with practised ease.

“Hoseok-hyung said to—” Jeongguk starts, hand playing with the back of his neck. A nervous habit, Taehyung catches. “He said to tell you to remember tomorrow’s show at the Society.”

“Hold on,” Taehyung says, and for a moment, he pushes the need for a Talk to the back of his mind. “*Hoseok-hyung* is on your dance team?”

“Uh, yeah?” It’s supposed to be an affirmative but comes out as a question and because Taehyung is kind and generous, he will let it slide. “Why’d you think we got along so well when you brought all your friends over?”

“Well, fuck me sideways,” Taehyung exclaims, letting out a huge breath. Fine, he’s slightly miffed that he knew nothing about this. Surely someone could’ve told him that Jeongguk was on the very same dance team Hoseok and Jimin were both on. Okay, wait, this is no time for being petty. “Anyway. We need to talk.”

Confusion passes over Jeongguk’s face for a few seconds before his eyes widen and he sucks in a breath and it looks as if he’s about to hightail the fuck out of the house.

“Can’t we just...ignore it?” Jeongguk pleads, and it’s the first time Taehyung has ever seen Jeongguk this desperate (aside from when he was eager and begging and underneath Taehyung, but that’s besides the point). “Just not talk about it?”

“No.” Taehyung is firm. Taehyung is assertive and unwavering in his

resolve. “It happened, and we need to talk about it.”

Jeongguk narrows his eyes. “Fine, then. Yeah, it happened. We were both drunk and it happened and while it happened, we liked it.” So, the normal Jeongguk is back, the one whose words cut like a knife and pulls his top lip back in distaste and doesn’t give a fuck that Taehyung is older than him by two whole years. “Let’s leave it at that.”

“Jeongguk.” Taehyung softens his voice, because he knows you can’t fight fire with fire. He insists, “We can’t just leave it at that, we need to actually sort this fucking thing out—”

“Look,” Jeongguk interrupts, and he’s louder this time. More sure of himself. “I’m tired, okay? I’m sick and tired of running around in circles and it happened. I know it happened, I know it too well, and I know that we have to deal with it. And forgetting that it ever happened in the first place—this is me dealing with it, alright?”

He sounds so, so tired. There’s a lull at the end of his words like he wants to let them go, a short breath between each syllable. “If you want to deal with it your way, then fine. But, to me, nothing ever happened, and I’m leaving it at that.”

Taehyung is firm. Taehyung is assertive and unwavering in his resolve, but so is Jeongguk.

winter 2015

Chapter Notes

taekook go home

Finals pass by in a whirlwind of sleepless nights and too many cups of coffee, and in the hecticness of it all, Taehyung barely sees Jeongguk around.

It's no secret that science majors have it especially tough when exam season rolls around, and it lapses back into the same thing that's been plaguing the house for a while: silent shadows, barely-there silhouettes, the creak of a door at midnight and an always-full fridge. Except that now, there's always a six-pack of Red Bull on the countertop, exactly two cans missing because a certain Chemistry major has grabbed them for himself and left the rest for Taehyung. Like there's a ghost in the house looking after him. Looking after the two of them, always making sure everything runs smoothly yet never, ever appearing.

He should hardly be surprised, to be honest—it's one step forward and two steps back, but Jeongguk isn't just stepping away, he's *sprinting* away, and Taehyung can't seem to chase after him no matter how hard he tries.

Finals pass by and so does fall. Before Taehyung knows it, winter has arrived, bringing with it the frigid cold that Seoul is known for. And, the most important part about winter:

"Winter break?"

"Yeah," Jimin says, shoving another spoonful of budaejigae into his mouth. It's a hotpot of ramen and melted cheese and ham. Taehyung stares at his own bowl of japchae and very much regrets trying to eat healthier. "Where are you gonna go?"

"Back home, I guess?" Taehyung shrugs and leans back into his seat. The idea of going back is unsettling and suddenly, the noodles look a lot less appetising. "Appa wants us to help with the wedding plans."

"Isn't it weird, though?" Jimin asks, eyes wide and shining and curious, keening forward in his seat.

“What?”

“Going back, calling them ‘appa’ and ‘eomma’, *planning their fucking wedding*, when you’ve literally kissed your stepbrother’s ass.”

Taehyung narrows his eyes, reaches out for a paper towel, wets it with his glass of water and throws it in Park Jimin’s face.

“That was so rude,” Jimin whines, plucking the soggy piece of tissue from his face and blowing a raspberry at Taehyung. “And you know it’s true.”

Of course Taehyung knows it’s true, but that doesn’t mean he likes to admit it. That doesn’t mean he likes to hear it, especially when it’s coming from someone who had, just a couple of weeks ago, been so caught up in his own problems he shut everyone else out and thought it would be okay. Not even when said someone is his best friend. Their friends would say that Taehyung plays around the most, but he likes to think that he’s at least a bit more mature in the emotional department than the rest—at least he confronts his problems, doesn’t bottle them up and wait for something to explode.

(Okay, so maybe Taehyung is very slightly bitter about Jeongguk refusing to even talk to him or acknowledge his existence in any way other than leaving offerings of caffeinated drinks lying around the house. Just very, very slightly.)

“Whatever,” Taehyung pouts.

The year has been more than slightly busy, and it’s the latter half of it that’s stuck in Taehyung’s mind as he crawls around on all fours trying to look for his damn things. It’s his own fault, really, that he can’t find anything he needs to bring home. His suitcase looks much too sparse, as if he’s brought everything with him from Daegu and left nothing behind and he doesn’t want to—doesn’t seem to be *able* to—bring anything back, even if it’s only for two short weeks.

He’s done with packing his clothes (and that’s pretty much all he’s going to bring, he’s going to be back at home, he’ll leech off the infinite supply of groceries as he fits) when the door creaks open. It’s four in the morning and three hours till their bus leaves. (Taehyung should be asleep.) Figures this is when Jeongguk decides to come home.

“Jeonggukkie,” Taehyung acknowledges softly, tilting his head up from where it’d just been buried inside his mess of a suitcase. (Folded

clothes? What nonsense.)

“Hyung,” Jeongguk replies.

But he doesn’t even look at Taehyung. Doesn’t even turn his body to face Taehyung in the simplest, most basic of manners. He simply heads straight to his room, avoiding Taehyung’s open door like the plague, the single living room lamp acting as a backlight.

Jeongguk is barely a silhouette. Even with the thin white shirt he has on, even with all the curves and lines of his bodies on display thanks to the fluorescent lamp flickering behind him as he walks past, his face is shrouded in darkness. Taehyung can’t tell a thing. He wonders if he had ever been able to to begin with.

It’s already too late (or rather, too early), and Taehyung is as lazy as Yoongi on a weekend, so he doesn’t sleep. In fact, he doesn’t even get up. He merely sits cross-legged on the ground next to his open suitcase.

The night is not young and it’s a perfect time to think. Sitting down in his sweatpants, ass freezing against the cold hard ground, yellow-tinted light filtering in from the few inches of the doorway to his room that he’d left open. Fingers playing with the frayed hem of his oversized shirt, the one that falls to cover his kneecaps when he’s sitting down just like this, head tilted backward and resting on the hard ledge of his bed frame.

All the way back in summer—he didn’t ever expect that his year would turn out like this. It’s almost coming to an end already, and he doesn’t feel quite ready to leave it behind, not when he still has a million problems that need solving. Not when he has Jeongguk in the room right next to his, lips zipped and mind shut. A boy who tells less than the truth but shows more than lies.

And he doesn’t think he’s ready. He is very, very sure he isn’t ready. He isn’t ready to go back and face his parents, because that means acknowledging to himself—and more importantly, to *Jeongguk*—that they’d done something no one would approve of. That they’d done it, and they don’t even have the guts to face it. He isn’t ready, because going back means leaving everything in Seoul behind—even just for a while, just for a fortnight, but Taehyung isn’t prepared to trust himself on this. Fuck, after the past few weeks, he isn’t prepared to trust himself on anything, much less this monumental task of self-control.

Before he knows it, it’s morning. Light (natural light, this time) floods

through the cracks in his blinds and he zips up the suitcase. Raps on the neighbouring door until Jeongguk comes out, face puffy and eyes swollen (but they're not red, because as much as Jeon Jeongguk likes to run away, he is always prepared) and bed hair a downright mess, suitcase dragging behind him.

It's with a few wordless nods that they head out to the bus terminal together. Usually, at this hour, it's barely packed—the citygoers are creatures of night, not morning—but it's winter break. College students go back in droves, spreading outwards from the cities and back to their hometowns.

"Let's go," Jeongguk mutters, and these are the first words that they've exchanged the whole day.

They sit as far away from each other as possible, which is not really possible, since they've got assigned seats and there's a full cabin today. Right next to each other, in fact, with Jeongguk plastering himself against against the window and Taehyung along the aisle, pressing into the armrest, as if distance would make the awkwardness that much less palpable. (Hint: it doesn't.)

And throughout the whole ride, Taehyung is thankful for distractions: for Minjae's texts complaining about how his grandmother keeps feeding him rice cakes, for the cacophony that is a crowded bus during a holiday, for the guy two seats away who's got his headphones in but is singing Gfriend songs out loud.

It's almost—*almost*—enough to distract him from how fucking close Jeongguk is. From how his bare arm is just a hair's breadth away, since the boy seems to be a furnace hundred percent of the time and opted to take his jacket off three minutes into the ride. From how his headphones are plugged in and his eyes are closed, but his head is still nodding to an unfathomable beat. From how the planes of his face reflect in the glass of the window, and Taehyung shouldn't care, he really shouldn't, but he does anyway, and he finds his gaze trailing back to the boy's face like a moth to a flame.

"Hey, Jeonggukkie." Taehyung nudges the boy awake, making sure to avoid any skin-on-skin contact. "You want to go down? We just got to the rest stop."

"Fuck," Jeongguk groans. His voice is hoarse and his muscles contract when he stretches his arms above his head, t-shirt rising just a bit. Taehyung swallows. "You mean we've still got two more hours? Can

you help me buy a coffee or something?”

“Brat,” Taehyung laughs. Instinctively, he reaches out to pinch Jeongguk’s cheeks and it stays there for a millisecond before he realises what he’s doing and snaps his hand away like he’s just been burnt.

Jeongguk doesn’t seem to notice, still caught up in the state of being half-asleep. “Come on, *hyung* .”

“You should go to the toilet anyway,” Taehyung rationalises. *Calm down, heart. Jeongguk didn’t notice your hand at all.* “Get your lazy ass off the seat or I’ll drag you myself.”

“I’d like to see you try,” Jeongguk snickers, eyes shining. “Don’t you remember that time I—” he starts, and then stops suddenly.

And for a moment, their gazes lock, as if both had been thinking of the exact same moment (*when Jeongguk flipped you over and kissed you so hard you couldn’t breathe* , a voice whispers) and Taehyung turns his head away so fast he swears he got a whiplash. And Jeongguk—he can’t see Jeongguk’s face, but the next time he turns back, there’s a slight flush on his cheeks and that uncharacteristic shyness again, the one that manifests itself not in hostility or anger but in avoidance.

No matter how many times Taehyung’s been to a rest stop (and, to be fair, it’s not often, given that he only ever travels back twice a year), he still can’t get used to how they’re practically a whole mall crammed into a single storey building practically in the middle of nowhere.

There’s not enough time to soak in everything, and before he knows it, he’s grabbing Jeongguk’s arm and sprinting to the toilet to avoid the inevitable queue. He tries to ignore the fact that there’s still that hint of awkwardness in the air, that the past conversation has been their longest one in a long time—long enough that it almost felt normal, yet not quite, not when reality pulls you back so fast and quick you can barely breathe.

“What do you want?” Taehyung asks. There’s not much left on the shelves, to be honest. The selection is disappointing and he finds himself gravitating toward the banana milk before realising it’s not banana milk, it’s *papaya* milk, and that’s downright blasphemous.

“Coffee’d be nice.”

That was easy enough. That was nice enough. But by the time they get back to the bus, it's as if the cloud has settled back again, one of awkwardness and tension. He passes Jeongguk the ice americano and a pack of rice crackers and he receives a small 'Thanks, hyung' in return, but that's about it.

Jeongguk seems to fall asleep as soon as he finishes the can of coffee—he seems to fall asleep *even though* he'd just finished a can of coffee—but Taehyung isn't so lucky. Two hours is long enough on its own, but two hours next to the stepbrother whom you might or might not (read: whom you very, very much) want to bone feels like forever.

"Kimchijigae again," Taehyung's dad announces with a bright smile. He places the pot down on the dining table and grins with what Taehyung thinks is way too much self-satisfaction, before settling down cross-legged on the ground with the other three.

It's still a little strange not just between him and Jeongguk (*that* awkwardness is a given) but between him and his new stepmother. It isn't anything like hostility or even close to it—it's just in the lack of closeness, he guesses. Not as if he's had much time to talk to his new maternal figure at all, not with being all the way up in Seoul, drowning in assignments and readings and sleeping in a room adjacent to Jeongguk, of all people.

But, as always, he deals with things. So he smiles politely and says the right words and serves her a bowl right after he serves his dad one, followed by Jeongguk, and then himself.

Halfway through the dinner, Yein asks, "You boys look really tense."

"Really?" Taehyung somehow manages to dig deep and musters a laugh. "I think we're just tired. Finals just ended, so..."

He trails off, eyes darting to the side and catching a glimpse of Jeongguk choking the slightest bit before trying to cough it out. So much for trying to act like everything's alright.

"Well, I think the living arrangement worked out pretty well," his

father remarks. “At least the two of you aren’t trying to bite each other’s heads off.”

If only he knew , Taehyung thinks.

The dinner table has always been rife with pleasantries and polite conversation and about twenty minutes in, Taehyung is already restless. But the worst part is—his phone keeps beeping, about every other minute or so, and even though it’s on silent mode, the vibration is audible in the small room and it jerks against the denim on his thighs like it’s got something to prove.

When he finally looks down, he realises that it’s Minjae. And, to be honest, he still thinks of Minjae as a good friend. He really does. But first the club incident, and now this incessant texting—he doesn’t know what to think.

He doesn’t realise he’s making a face until Yein asks, “Is something wrong?”

“Nothing,” Taehyung reassures. He tucks his phone between his thigh and the cushion on the ground. “Just a friend that keeps texting me, don’t worry.”

Taehyung doesn’t need to even look to the side to see that Jeongguk has tensed up. The dining table is small, and being seated right next to Taehyung, Taehyung knows that Jeongguk can see who exactly the sender was. They never really got along well to begin with, if Taehyung were to be honest. It’s a wonder, since they’re alike in some ways (yet so different in others).

A hand lands on his knee and he almost jerks out of instinct, before playing it off by anchoring his palms into the ground.

This is new territory, he thinks. They’ve done much more than skin contact through a layer of clothing, but this is different—they’re in front of their *parents* . And of course Taehyung isn’t stupid, of course he knows that this is supposed to be a reassuring gesture, a comforting touch, but all it’s doing is making his heart palpitate faster. Whether it’s excitement or adrenaline or god knows what, he’s got no clue. He wishes that a touch like this would cut through whatever tension they have, whatever tension they’ve built up over the past few months. But this is reality, and there’s no such thing as an easy save.

So when he finally turns around to look at Jeongguk (and, god, this table really *is* tiny, why is Jeongguk’s face so close?) there’s a weird

look on Jeongguk's face. One mixed with concern and awkwardness and an expression that screams oh-my-god-what-am-I-doing. But ultimately it's still one of care, one that silently asks Taehyung if everything is alright.

Taehyung replies with a nod, almost imperceptibly, one so small that his parents miss it, caught up in eating bulgogi.

He expects that Jeongguk's hand will remove itself. That it will go away. Maybe after a few seconds, a few minutes. But it doesn't. It stays there, as if anchoring itself to Taehyung, as if the longer it stays there, the more comfortable it gets. As if it belongs there.

And slowly, Taehyung realises, his heart isn't racing just because their parents are right there. His heart isn't racing because he's scared his father will see and ask why Jeongguk's hand has been on his knee for the past fifteen minutes. His heart is racing because it's not just anyone's hand on his knee, it's *Jeongguk's*, and Jeongguk hasn't even bothered to look in his direction for the past couple of weeks when all he wanted—all he needed—was some acknowledgement that *something* happened that night, that he hadn't been thrown aside right after Jeongguk decides to throw *himself* aside.

He calms his heart. Taehyung breathes, tries his best to steady it. But when their parents are in the kitchen fixing up dessert, he shifts forward to grab another serving of rice, their bare feet brush, and—he's not the biggest fan of feet. He doesn't hate them either, but it's not like they are particularly appealing. Yet when this happens the only thing going on in his head is a mantra of *fuck fuck fuck* and his heart is back at it again.

When Taehyung makes no move to shift away, Jeongguk takes it as a sign. Taehyung can almost imagine the fight going on in Jeongguk's head, the silent swallow before Jeongguk gradually slides his hand up from Taehyung's knee to right above, then to the lower part of his thigh, then *along* it—

And Taehyung presses his hand down on Jeongguk's, stopping it just before it hits his groin. Fucking hell, what is the boy *thinking*? Two weeks of practically nothing, and now he attempts a handjob at the dinner table?

But with their parents currently absent, he allows instinct to take over. Not completely, but enough. He wraps his fingers around Jeongguk's, grabbing the other's hand in his, resolutely staring forward into a

vague point on the wall. Strokes one of Jeongguk's fingers with his thumb and the other with his index finger. Does it slowly, surely, then moves to use his entire palm to encase Jeongguk's fingers. Sliding up and down, the same way he'd stroke Jeongguk's cock.

Their parents return. Jeongguk gulps, and Taehyung knows that Jeongguk knows.

Taehyung doesn't dare to say that he *expects* it, because that would be setting himself up for potential failure, but he kind of does. He kind of expects the two sharp but hesitant knocks on his door at midnight, when their parents are downstairs and asleep and the lights are all off.

"Come in," he calls out. He pretends to busy himself with unpacking.

Jeongguk walks in, and Taehyung can tell without turning around. It's not just that he's the only other person in the house—Taehyung has grown so fucking used to the boy, he can tell that it's Jeongguk just by his footfalls and breathing. By the way he moves so fluidly across the ground even when he's a nervous wreck.

"Is everything alright?" Jeongguk asks. A careless whisper into the dark room, lit up by only the bedside lamp.

"Yeah, don't worry," Taehyung says. Even to himself it sounds weak, and it's made worse by three rapid buzzes from his phone. He sighs. "Minjae's just being a bit clingy."

"I don't think he's a very nice person."

Taehyung gives him a look.

"Okay, correction: I think he's really fuckin' creepy and you need to stop hanging around him."

"He's just a bit..." Taehyung trails off, tearing through his mental dictionary for the right word, "...possessive?"

"A little bit possessive is still possessive," Jeongguk sighs, exasperated.

"Friends aren't *supposed* to be possessive in the first place, hyung. That's unhealthy in whatever kind of relationship."

"It's okay. I'll deal with it," Taehyung says. "I always do."

And then, "Come sit down next to me."

There is a split second of hesitation, one that feels like forever, before Jeongguk gingerly lowers himself onto the bed. Taehyung has long since pushed the mess that exploded out from his suitcase onto the ground, so now it looks as if a dozen people had just left evidence of their giant orgy on his ground (if said dozen people all had Taehyung's impeccable sense of fashion), and Jeongguk's feet almost tangle up one of his hoodies as he brings his legs up to his chest. Presses his thighs into his torso and rests his cheek on a kneecap, head turning to look at Taehyung.

Fuck. It's always those damn doe eyes, wide and bright and glinting with something even in the poorly-lit room. Taehyung has never been the best at reading people, but he likes to think he can read Jeongguk's—concerned and curious and something else.

Jeongguk sucks in a breath. "What was that, at dinner?"

"I should be the one asking that," Taehyung laughs, as if laughter will get rid of the question hanging in the air. "At the table? Seriously?"

"I was *not* the one advertising my mediocre handjob skills, thank you very much."

"Your little friend in those tight-ass jeans thought otherwise."

"Little? I guess we're twins, then."

They both dissolve into laughter, into fits of giggles at this kind of... friendly banter, is the only way Taehyung can put it. He doesn't quite know how else he is supposed to react, because even with them trying to make light of things, the tension doesn't dissipate. It stays there. Hell, it's been there for a long, long while, and he's been suffocating in it for ages.

"Can I try something?"

"Okay."

The kiss is hesitant. It's their first sober, lucid kiss, and Jeongguk

doesn't taste like anything Taehyung has had before. Nothing cliché. Not home or fireworks or the adrenaline of a quick fuck rushing through his veins. Just this: two mouths, two tongues intertwining, two pairs of hands roaming around the others' necks, two sets of fingers reaching for the crook of a collarbone or the obstacle of a shirt button or the slope of a hipbone.

They might have been slightly drunk the previous night, but Taehyung remembers everything as clear as day. He remembers *Jeongguk* as clear as day. He remembers the nooks and crannies of Jeongguk's body, the way he moans when Taehyung pulls on his hair a little too hard, the way his small waist flares out into a slight hip. And he presses Jeongguk into the bed, throws one leg across Jeongguk's torso and anchors him down onto the mattress.

"Come on, shirt off," Taehyung breathes against Jeongguk's mouth.

Jeongguk grunts in response, back arching off the bed so that he can grab the hem and pull it all the way over, tossing it to a side.

Taehyung grins and pats his cheek. "Good boy."

"Don't call me 'boy'," Jeongguk sighs, and there's almost a slight whine to it. He reaches for Taehyung's shirt and takes it off, too, and for a moment—for a moment where Taehyung sees only dark fabric and nothing else, for a millisecond, he marvels at how slow and languid they're being. They could be caught any time. Their parents are right below them, and yet, they're making out as if they have all the time in the world.

"W-wait," Taehyung stutters. His hands falter and a confused look settles on Jeongguk's face. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

"Not really," Jeongguk admits. "But I want to do it anyway."

"Do you, really? No regrets? Are you gonna throw me to one side again like you did?"

At this, Jeongguk falls silent. His face is blank, not even a guilty wince. But a second later, he replies, "No, I won't. I want this."

Taehyung pauses. "I want this too."

So he leans down and catches Jeongguk's mouth with his. He threads his fingers through Jeongguk's hair and grasps them like a lifeline, revels in each and every stuttered breath that escapes from

Jeongguk's mouth with each pull. He trails his lips to Jeongguk's ear and snags his teeth on a piercing, runs them down the length of Jeongguk's neck and nips at his collarbone. Wraps his lips around a nipple and sucks and delights in the desperate moan echoing in his room.

"*Tae*," Jeongguk groans, fingers tightening in Taehyung's hair. "More."

Jeongguk's hips buck up, eager for some sort of release, some sort of stimulation, the tent already visible even though they've barely done anything yet. And Taehyung grinds back down, rolls his hips into Jeongguk's as he rolls his tongue around Jeongguk.

"Come on, help me with your jeans," Taehyung mutters, reluctantly moving away from Jeongguk's torso. (Jeongguk has a very, very nice torso.) "They're fucking tight."

"You love it," Jeongguk laughs, but fiddles with the button anyway.

"Can't say I don't."

Teamwork makes the dream work, apparently, and they manage to get Taehyung's pants off too (though that's a lot easier, since Taehyung has the sense to wear properly-fitting jeans and not skinnies) and, fuck, Jeongguk looks like a veritable god. Splayed out on the bed between his thighs, completely naked except for a pair of boxer-briefs. Cheeks red and flushed, mouth small and pink and swollen. Arms tense from fisting at the sheets.

"I'm going to do something," Taehyung says, "and you're not allowed to touch."

"To touch you?"

"Not allowed to touch me, not allowed to touch yourself."

Jeongguk squeezes his eyes shut. "Fuck."

Taehyung pulls both their undergarments off. "Sit up against the headboard."

"Are you gonna ride me?" Jeongguk asks, and if Taehyung didn't know better, he'd say that the boy was even slightly awed.

"The night's still young," Taehyung smiles. "Remember: don't touch."

He adjusts himself. Shifts himself such that he's straddling Jeongguk's

thigh in the most comfortable manner possible. Both their cocks are curving up into their stomachs, but he's far enough from Jeongguk's groin that they won't touch. He digs into the bedside drawer and grabs a bottle of lube, rubs the sticky liquid all over his hands before finally, fucking finally, touching himself.

"Oh, god," Taehyung groans, throwing his head back.

He knows how lewd he must look right now, but he's not in the right mind to care. Rubs a finger over the tip and slides it up and down, imagines that it's Jeongguk's hands, Jeongguk's mouth. And with his other hand, he inserts a finger into himself—it's been a while, not since before summer—and at first, it's tight. It's so tight he isn't sure if anything would be able to fit. But it does, and the feeling of fullness is somewhat familiar and comforting and addictive.

"Fuck, Tae," Jeongguk breathes. He looks completely wrecked, Taehyung thinks, and he's barely been touched at all. Jeongguk's head presses into the wall, fists turning white with the strain of gripping the sheets. "You look so good."

"Remember," Taehyung whispers, still rubbing circles around the tip of his cock and, now, inserting another finger into himself. "Don't—ah, *right there, fuck—touch.*"

And with the third finger, Taehyung feels full, so full and yet so unsatisfied because it's his own fingers, not Jeongguk's fingers, not Jeongguk's cock.

He pulls them out and pushes his body up against Jeongguk's. Brings their cocks together with one hand, and, fuck, it feels so good. He can't tell where he ends and where Jeongguk begins and he loves it.

"I'm guessing I can touch now," Jeongguk breathes, mouthing at the strip of skin between Taehyung's neck and collarbone, hand sliding down to wrap around both their cocks. "Cockslut."

"That's your title, remember?" Taehyung smirks. Then he presses their foreheads together, and now they're nose to nose, mouth to mouth, and Taehyung has never felt anything better. "Usually, I'd top. But since this is probably your first time in a long while, I'll bottom. Just for you."

"So sweet," Jeongguk mocks, still stroking both their cocks. Then his gaze turns into one of concern. "You sure, though?"

"Yeah, don't worry," Taehyung says. "I want to ride you."

Taehyung sinks down onto Jeongguk, the sudden emptiness that he'd felt when he removed his fingers suddenly disappearing, only to be replaced by a ridiculously satisfying fullness. Jeongguk is not particularly long but he's hard and thick and it *has* been a while for Taehyung, it takes a few seconds to adjust to it, but when he begins bouncing up and down and Jeongguk hits that sweet spot—

"Fuck, Guk-ah," Taehyung moans. "That spot, right there."

"You feel so good, Tae," Jeongguk breathes, fingers digging into Taehyung's hips to anchor him with each upward thrust of his own. "So tight."

Taehyung leans forward, palms pressing into the wall behind Jeongguk's head. And soon enough, chests and noses and foreheads and mouths pressing together, too, each nook of his body lined up next to Jeongguk's.

Jeongguk comes first, spilling inside of Taehyung's asshole. It's warm and sticky and probably kind of disgusting once they turn the lights on, but it feels like heaven. It's not long before Taehyung comes too. Comes as he whispers Jeongguk's name against his mouth. As euphoria fills him up to the very brim and he hears Jeongguk murmuring his name into his skin, as he tightens his hands in Jeongguk's scalp and basks in the warmth of another body. No, not just another body—of Jeongguk.

"What a mess," Jeongguk laughs. He swipes a finger on his stomach and eyes the liquid with an overly suspicious eye.

And Taehyung being Taehyung, he leans forward and takes Jeongguk's finger into his mouth. It's salty and warm and bitter and not quite pleasant, but Jeongguk's reaction when he begins swirling his tongue around and deep-throating Jeongguk's finger makes it all worth it.

"Don't start what you can't finish," Jeongguk warns, though there is a playful glint in his eye. He's more lighthearted now than Taehyung has seen him, at least in the past few weeks. "Can't believe we forgot a condom, though. Are you clean?"

In the heat of the moment, Taehyung barely registered that they'd forgotten a condom. "Yeah, I am. Got tested and everything."

"Good, me too," Jeongguk replies, and his voice is softer now.

Jeongguk eventually returns to his own room and Taehyung does his part, too. In cleaning himself, in making sure the floor is free of strewn clothing.

When he rolls back into bed at three in the morning fresh from the shower, the smell of come mixed with mint and chamomile still cuts through the air. It lingers in the sheets, and he tries to tell himself this: it's just mint and chamomile. It's just shampoo and body soap. Just that particular brand of shampoo and body soap that Jeongguk always buys and runs out of way too goddamn fast.

But it's a little hard, he admits. He falls asleep not to mint and chamomile, but to Jeongguk.

spring 2016, i

Chapter Summary

warning: this chapter includes attempted sexual assault in the very last scene

There's a reason why secrets should remain secrets, but there's also a reason why few secrets ever stay that way.

The two weeks back in Daegu are messy. After the first night (when Taehyung had fallen into Jeongguk and Jeongguk had fallen back into Taehyung), the next thirteen are characterised by quick, hooded glances, by the pull of hair as Jeongguk comes, by the smell of sweat and slick and, somewhere in the back, hidden underneath all the adrenaline and post-sex high, shame. It's particularly potent whenever he sees his father and Yein smiling at each other like their partner holds the world, but Taehyung pushes it aside the moment Jeongguk grabs him by the wrist and quietly pulls the door shut.

It's a secret, they both know that. A secret they can't tell. Taehyung isn't itching to spill it out to anyone, not really—but it's still there, nagging at the back of his mind. And instead of a burden weighing on his conscience, it's more—it's more exciting, more exhilarating, than anything else.

It's a secret, yes. But it's their secret.

(And if the thought that this could break their family apart still lingers—well, the hole has been dug anyway, he might as well see it to the grave.)

“How the fuck are your fingers not freezing to death? I know you gotta carry those boxes quickly, but you still need some goddamn gloves.”

New year, new place. They'd spent Christmas over in Daegu and now it's back to the big city, where responsibilities and nightly trysts await, lugging their suitcases and boxes from one building to another in the freezing cold. It's not starting to warm up, not the slightest bit—

winter is unforgiving, and winter in Seoul even more so—and Taehyung can feel his lips starting to chap with each moment out on the pavement. Right now, there's only one thing on his mind, and that's to get all the goddamn boxes into the lobby as fast as possible.

Their new place is slightly bigger, the result of calling in a favour from a family friend. It's only slightly further away from the university and the luxury of a proper kitchen (instead of a dingy old kitchenette) and heating throughout the entire building is enough for both him and Jeongguk to agree to the move.

"Fuckin' finally," Jeongguk heaves, the moment they've got the last of their boxes into the lift. The rest of their belongings are already in the flat itself, and only these few boxes remain. He shrugs his coat off and Taehyung turns his head away from the boy's collarbones. "That took forever."

"Only 'cause you were being a dumbass about it and refused to take the smaller ones," Taehyung mocks. "Chivalry and all that."

"You wouldn't have tried anyway," Jeongguk sneers. It's in a playful manner though, Taehyung can tell. It seems like he can tell a lot of things these days.

The new unit is bare and unfurnished and clean, and Taehyung kind of likes it. Completely new, completely untarnished. A clean slate.

It takes three hours for them to unpack everything, and even then, the bulk of Taehyung's clothes are still stuffed at the bottom of his suitcase. His new room is substantially larger, three of the walls white and the last of them a slate grey courtesy of the previous owner, enough space for a queen-sized bed and a study desk to match. As he goes about trying to stuff the rest of his belongings under the bed (out of sight, out of mind, you see), the door creaks open.

Jeongguk leans against the doorway, biceps on full display. Who wears a *muscle tank* in winter, really?

"Do you wanna see the rooftop?" he asks, after they've stared at each other for three full seconds. Three uncertain, loaded seconds, throughout which Taehyung had really wanted to grab Jeongguk by the shoulders and ask what he wanted and maybe kiss the heck out of him.

"Is it not cold enough for you?" Taehyung laughs. But he kicks his backpack to one corner (not quite out of sight, but out of mind

nevertheless) and follows Jeongguk out anyway.

The way to the rooftop is confusing, and Taehyung doesn't really know how Jeongguk found this path. He trails behind the younger, through the stairwell and then to an awning and from there, a fire escape that leads all the way up to the top floor, and he's faced with a heavy yet unlocked door. They step out onto the rooftop—him so close to Jeongguk that they're almost pressing together, but not quite, because he doesn't dare do so. A pack of cigarettes tucked into his back pocket and a strange, tingling anticipation that has been brewing all day long simmering in his heart.

But, oh god, it's gorgeous. There's nothing else here but the two of them and Seoul sprawled out in front of them from twenty stories above, streets and alleys running through the city like veins, only to meet at the bank of a river much wider and much more intimidating from this height. Everything is moving. Nothing is still—not the people, not the cars, not the roads. Buildings and sidewalks blanketed in snow and the wind bites at his fingertips, and yet—it's gorgeous.

Taehyung snaps out of it only when he feels two sharp knocks to the side of his temple, a knuckle rapping against his skull in a thoroughly annoying way.

"Fucking—" Taehyung hisses, glaring at Jeongguk, who's snickering away at the side. "What'd you do that for? I'm your hyung, fucking hell."

"You were staring so hard at the city I thought you were going to fall into it," Jeongguk says.

He might as well have, Taehyung thinks. It would be easy enough.

He fishes a cigarette out from the back of his jeans, fingers briefly jerking from the cold. It makes his joints all achy and creaky, even the finger joints. Smoking in winter is great—the smoke is warm and tobacco feels gritty and dirty and he loves it. Yet the tradeoff is only sometimes worth it, of potential frostbite and trembling hands.

"Can I have one?"

"I thought you said you didn't smoke," Taehyung accuses.

"Since when have I ever not lied?" Jeongguk smirks, and in the two seconds it takes Taehyung to wrap his mind around that statement, Jeongguk's already swiped the cigarette and lighter away from his

hands.

“Brat.” Taehyung wrinkles his nose. He gives in anyway, because this is Jeongguk. “Yah, pass the light.”

Jeongguk tosses it over with a flick of his wrist and Taehyung brings it to the end of his stick, but there’s no fuel left. No matter how many times he rolls his thumb over the rough ridge of the lighter, nothing comes up. Only a sad, pathetic sound as the lighter attempts to light up with nothing inside but air.

“This is your fault,” Taehyung frowns. “C’mere.”

He places a hand on the back of Jeongguk’s neck, drags his face closer, the newly-lit cigarette still stuck between his teeth. Uses his other hand to angle his own cigarette towards Jeongguk’s, bringing the two ends together, inhaling until the end of his stick glows amber. (Swears he hears someone’s heart beating at a million miles a minute, and admits that he doesn’t know whose it was.)

When Taehyung pulls back, Jeongguk’s eyes are dark. They’re dark and half-lidded, lips cherry-red despite the cold, cheeks a ruddy pink from the chill. Jeongguk takes a long drag and exhales. He maintains eye contact with Taehyung while smoke chases from his plump mouth—he knows what he’s doing, he knows what he’s doing to Taehyung. And this thought makes Taehyung antsy. He wants to do something, anything; but he doesn’t know what, and he doesn’t know what is appropriate.

There’s an ashtray on the rooftop, and they stub out the cigarettes there instead of throwing them onto the ground.

“Good boy,” Taehyung mutters, watching Jeongguk press the completely used cigarette into the ceramic, fingers rolling around the joint.

But Jeongguk turns around and comes face-to-face with Taehyung and Taehyung doesn’t quite know what to do—Jeongguk is so close and his eyes are so bright and his lips are so full, and he can’t help it, he leans forward and plants a kiss on Jeongguk’s mouth. And it’s not quite the same, this time. They’re not sneaking around with their parents a few rooms away, they don’t have to rush through their kisses with teeth and tongue and ferociousness instead of finesse.

They have more time than they deserve, they have nothing else stopping them except the cold. So they take their time. Taehyung

winds one arm around Jeongguk's neck and presses their bodies together with the other, falls into Jeongguk as easily as anything he's ever done before. It's slow and languid and Jeongguk tastes like tobacco, earthy and bitter. He runs his tongue across the top of Jeongguk's mouth and pushes their hips together. Delights in the almost inaudible whimper that escapes from the younger.

Taehyung was the one who started it, and in the end, it's Taehyung who pulls away. They're both breathing heavily, chests heaving and mouths red and swollen.

"Maybe we should get back in. It's getting cold."

"Yeah," he agrees. He wraps his arm around the other and shuffles them both into the shelter, where real life awaits. "It is."

As the snow on cracked pavements parts to make way for spring, Taehyung gets to know Jeongguk better. It's not just the nightly trysts, even though those are arguably the main highlight of Taehyung's day. (Nothing quite like coming home after a long day to a nice, long fuck. Changing their sheets every other day is not a problem.) But it's the small moments, when Jeongguk makes him toast even though he has an eight am class, or when they watch *Running Man* together and laugh so hard they want to cry, or when they argue over whether Kim Woobin or Lee Minho is better—it's these moments that makes Taehyung's chest swell.

It's another night again—now, it seems, his days are strung together by series of nights—and he's just received their first graded assignment for his Econometrics class and he's drowning. He's drowning in a sea of probability and graphs and numbers and, unsurprisingly, soju.

"It's a Wednesday night," Jeongguk says, the moment he comes back from dance practice and sees Taehyung dying on the coffee table. Actually, literally dying. "Why are you drinking?"

"My assignment is due in seventeen hours," Taehyung moans, and he doesn't know if it's because of the realisation that *his assignment is due in seventeen hours, what the actual fuck, he hasn't even written a single number*, or if it's because Jeongguk is in a muscle tank and covered in

a sheen of sweat and the fabric is sticking to his stomach. "Tell me again why I'm majoring in Economics."

"Because you are a conformist who has a strange need to live up to people's expectations," Jeongguk quips. He plops down on the ground next to Taehyung, leaning back against the leg of the sofa.

"And you're not?"

"I actually like Chemistry, thank you very much." Jeongguk adjusts his legs and brings his knees to his chest. "Nothing quite like some carbon-carbon bonds to get me all pumped up."

Okay. Jeongguk is a nerd. Did he just...

"Did you just use 'pumped up' in a completely serious and unironic sense?"

Red creeps up from his neck and over his cheeks and through his ears, and Taehyung thinks it's absolutely adorable.

See, it's nights like these. Not just the nightly trysts, but the small things—Jeongguk stealing Taehyung's bottle of soju when he thinks Taehyung's not looking (it's only a thousand five hundred won, but still), or when he grabs a pillow and stuffs it behind Taehyung's neck so he doesn't literally die trying to complete his assignment, or when he pulls up Wolfram Alpha on his phone just so Taehyung can confirm that no, his calculator is not faulty, the number really *is* that strange.

And so it goes. Whoever decided to assign a deadline of twelve in the fucking afternoon must be a sadist through and through, because it's seven in the morning by the time Taehyung is finished. The whole time—the whole goddamn time, Jeongguk has been by his side. Waiting, trying, helping whenever he can even though he's got a lecture at ten and dance practice at three.

So when he finally clicks the submit button and turns to the side to see that Jeongguk's fallen asleep, head falling into the crook of Taehyung's neck, hair tickling Taehyung's collarbone and looking for all intents and purposes like an actual angel, Taehyung can't help but card his fingers through the strands of Jeongguk's hair and place a kiss to his forehead.

“Jiminie!” Taehyung calls out. He fumbles forward and into his friend, ignoring the way Jimin almost topples over at the force. “I haven’t seen you in twenty years.”

“More like ‘two weeks’, yeah?”

“Don’t ruin the moment,” Taehyung mumbles, voice muffled by Jimin’s newly blond mop of hair. A lot can change in two weeks, it seems. “How was your break?”

“Good,” Jimin smiles, eyes curving into small crescents and cheeks puffing out. “Hokkaido was amazing.”

Taehyung listens. He listens to Jimin talking about how Sapporo was laid out just like a grid, all squares and straight lines throughout, only to be hindered by a river cutting through the middle of the city. About how Furano, a small town famous for its springtime tulips, was still beautiful even in the winter. About how the portside town of Hakodate thrived on tourists and fresh seafood and sweet potato ice cream.

“And how are Papa and Mama Park?”

“They’re good.” Jimin words are softer, but fond, like he’s thinking of home. “A bit sad to see me come back up to Seoul, but what can I do?”

What can anyone do, really? Sometimes Jimin gets like this—his voice drifts off, his gaze drifts off, and a million thoughts start whirling in his mind. He wears his heart on his sleeve like a badge of honour and it shows on his face. And Taehyung, the de facto best friend, can’t do much except watch him float away, until the anchor he’s tied to his own feet drags him back.

“Tae,” someone calls out. “Don’t leave your laundry lying around.”

Taehyung whirls around (the voice is familiar, whispered into his ears over the past many nights) and glares. “First of all, I’m your *hyung*. Second, don’t refer to people as ‘laundry’, it’s really rude.”

“Tae,” Jeongguk emphasises, eyes glinting. “I was talking about your actual, literal laundry. You’re not the only one staying in the house, you know.”

“We’re at school anyway, I can’t do anything about it,” Taehyung dismisses, ignoring the way Jeongguk slides into the seat next to his without a second thought, body too close for comfort. Or maybe he’s always been this close and Taehyung never noticed because he’d been stashing the thought away, banking on the notion that ignorance leads to bliss.

“Hi Jeongguk,” Jimin greets. And Taehyung knows that look—to anyone else, they’d probably miss it, but he knows Jimin well enough. “Can’t believe you guys almost forgot I’m right here.”

The red on Jeongguk’s face spreads fast and hot, and Taehyung takes it onto himself to blow a loud raspberry at Jimin, indignant.

“What are you even talking about?” Taehyung asks, daring Jimin to say something.

“ *Nothing* ,” Jimin sings.

With the two weeks spent back home, Taehyung has almost forgotten about how Minjae is mindlessly persistent. It’s strange. Minjae is nice enough, but ever since winter break when his phone had blown up with messages from the Business major—or, wait, was he a Drama major?—he’s been steadfastly ignoring his friend.

“Taehyung!” someone calls out.

It’s Minjae, and Taehyung has half a mind to dash into the nearest classroom, but he can’t do that when there are hundreds of other students running from class to class. He groans out loud and resigns himself to his fate.

“Minjae.” Taehyung smiles, tight and close-lipped. “Haven’t seen you in a while.”

“You too, Tae.” *Tae? Fucking goddamn calling him* Tae. “Didn’t you see my messages?”

“Sorry, I was really busy over break,” Taehyung dismisses, trying his best to sound as apologetic as humanly possible. Which is actually really hard, especially when you’re not apologetic in the least. “Family

and all that.”

“It’s alright, I understand,” Minjae smiles. It reaches his eyes and looks genuine and Taehyung thinks, just for a moment, that maybe he has gotten it all wrong. Maybe *Taehyung* is the villain here, misreading nonexistent signs and blaming the wrong people. “Do you wanna catch up over coffee? I’ve got a lot to tell you.”

“Okay, sure,” Taehyung agrees. What harm could it do, anyway?
“Why not?”

It’s not particularly crowded now, not on a weekday afternoon when lessons have just started up and students haven’t started ditching lectures yet. The small cafe barely has any people at all, and some sort of English folk song echoes around the room the moment they enter.

“Taehyung?”

Of all the people, it’s Jeongguk. Jeongguk, standing behind the counter with an apron and a nametag and a slightly stunned expression on his face. His mouth quirks into a small, almost shy smile before his gaze falls onto Minjae and, in that one split second, his face goes blank. Lips pressed into a thin line, curled downward at the ends, eyebrows knitted.

“Jeongguk,” Taehyung greets with a hesitant smile. He moves to stand in front of Minjae, hoping that maybe—just maybe—blocking him from Jeongguk’s view would alleviate some of the tension. Unsurprisingly, it doesn’t quite work. “I didn’t know you worked here.”

“I’m here on Tuesdays and Thursdays,” Jeongguk says warily, eyes still on Minjae. “What are you guys doing here?”

“We’re on a date,” Minjae interrupts. His voice is sickly sweet and slightly smug, and Taehyung freezes.

“Really?”

“No, don’t listen to him.” Taehyung rushes through his words. A misunderstanding is the last thing he needs right now. “He’s just playing around.”

Jeongguk narrows his eyes. “What’d you like to order?”

They receive their drinks (a long black for Taehyung and a matcha

espresso for Minjae—maybe this is a sign he shouldn't trust Minjae, who the hell mixes coffee with tea?) and settle in a corner booth, one that is out of Jeongguk's line of sight.

"What was that about?" Taehyung asks, voice low.

Minjae leans back into his seat and folds his arms over each other, but his words are genuinely apologetic. "Nothing, sorry. I was stupid."

"You were," Taehyung agrees. "Okay, talk."

So they talk. The air is slightly hostile and Taehyung has his guard up. When Minjae leans forward and rests his forearms on the edge of the table, keening forward, Taehyung pulls back and presses the small of his back into the chair. He listens—he's not quite sure if everything is going in, and he can't quite tell if Minjae's words are genuine, but he tries his best.

Minjae explains. Taehyung thinks he's saying something along the lines of texts, of why it feels like they've drifted apart lately and he wants to repair their friendship and he's sorry if he's given Taehyung the wrong signs.

When they leave, Taehyung's heart doesn't feel settled. It doesn't feel as if something has been put to rest, that the problem is done and settled. But Minjae leaves with a smile and they're kinda-sorta-okay now, Taehyung hopes. And as Taehyung leaves, he tries to ignore how Jeongguk's eyes pierce into the back of his head.

Taehyung finally realises why all of his friends—*all* of them, not just Jimin—have been casting him suggestive looks and smiling as if they hold a secret.

It starts with small things: when the whole gang eats out together, the rest inevitably trail behind and let Jeongguk and Taehyung take the front, and the two would end up squished together in the booth. Whenever Jeongguk and Taehyung so much as talk to each other, everyone else would look on with knowing, smug looks. After this happens for the fourth time in a week, Taehyung has had enough. He's not as oblivious as he might seem.

But before he can say anything, Jeongguk snaps, “Why are you guys laughing? What’s so funny?”

Everyone jerks at the sudden sound. It’s a little strange, Taehyung admits. Jeongguk is usually reserved around the rest, friendly but still closed off enough that he blends into the background. So for him to go off like this—it’s not exactly expected, not at all. His lips are pulled into a tight line, forehead creased, still radiating from the irritation of whatever is brewing on his mind.

“Uh, nothing,” Namjoon says. It’s almost immediate, the way he steps up to try and calm everything down. The way Yoongi and Hoseok move closer to Jimin and the way Seokjin frowns, steadies himself, ready to step in if anything goes wrong.

Then Jeongguk clams up. As sudden as it came, the look of annoyance on his face vanishes, like he has been pulled back taut with a string and snapped back to reality.

“Jeongguk,” Taehyung asks, voice lowered. “Are you okay?”

He doesn’t answer, but the nod is there—small, but definitely there. Jimin casts Taehyung a concerned look and he has to waive it away with a responding jerk of his head.

Jeongguk is—he’s not quite reverting back to his old ways, back to that stoic, cold demeanour that he wore around like he had something to prove. Not quite ignoring Taehyung in the most horrible way possible. But it’s definitely not the same as when they were back in Daegu. In Daegu, in spite of all the sneaking around—*because* of all the sneaking around—they had been too preoccupied with adrenaline and endorphins to care about anything else, and Jeongguk had fit into Taehyung like a glove, both literally and figuratively. They’d clicked, and that in itself was amazing. It was amazing and it was enough.

Maybe it’s something about Seoul. Maybe it’s something about the daily routine of going for lectures and tutorials and having to actually do your laundry yourself that gets to a person, that reminds them of reality and responsibilities. Maybe it’s the way their friends are not-so-subtly trying to get them together when they’re already fucking behind an open door.

Whatever it is—Taehyung doesn’t like it. Jeongguk is withdrawing, both from his touch and his care, and it doesn’t just make Taehyung feel weird. He feels upset, and all he wants to do is fix it, whatever it is.

So Taehyung being Taehyung, i.e. an absolute idiot on the worst of occasions, asks,

“Why did you lie?”

“Lie?” Jeongguk looks more confused than offended.

“Like,” Taehyung begins, and it’s something so hard to put into words even though it’s been nagging at him for far too long, “you say you don’t smoke, but you smoked with me the other day. You said you don’t do hookups, but I definitely saw you bring people back.”

Silence. That’s all there is, Jeongguk sinking further into the couch with each passing second, fingers curling tighter and tighter around the mug until his knuckles turn white.

He stares straight ahead, resolutely not looking at Taehyung.

“Jeonggukkie?”

Jeongguk startles. “Yeah?” Like he hadn’t heard what Taehyung just said. Like he hadn’t been throwing the words around his mind so hard and so fast that he barely registered what was going on. Like he was actually surprised.

“Why’d you lie?” Taehyung asks. Gently, this time. Softly.

“I—I just—”

“You lied, just like how Minjae lied,” Taehyung points out, more insistent and urgent this time. Bitterness floods his mouth as he says the words—Minjae lied about his fucking *major*, and he’s pissed, of course he is, but he this is Jeongguk and for Jeongguk to lie about anything doesn’t even leave him angry, it leaves him disappointed and the slightest bit sad.

“I don’t know,” Jeongguk mutters. His body gives in, sags and hunches forward, all the air blown out of him. All the fight blown out of him. “It just happened.”

Taehyung waits. “Are you lying about anything else?”

“No, I don’t think so.”

Taehyung likes to think that he knows Jeongguk well enough, but maybe he has been pretending this whole time. Maybe Jeongguk wasn’t the only one lying. Maybe he had been lying to himself too.

Lying about what he'd known, or what he thought he knew, when it had been nothing more than empty words and wishful thinking.

It's more than a little unsettling. Taehyung isn't stupid. Taehyung isn't blind, he's noticed the contradictory statements, but it's always easier to pretend they were merely a slip of the tongue. Yet, as much as he wants to bury the hatchet, throw everything aside and simply not care, it's hard. It's hard. When Jeongguk jumps at the slightest thing and has a million thoughts swirling around his mind—Taehyung can tell, of course he can tell, how can he not notice the way Jeongguk chews on the inside of his cheek or the way he curls into himself—it's hard.

"Are you sure?" Taehyung asks. He sits down beside Jeongguk. They're barely touching.

Jeongguk bites his lip. "I hope so."

And then, "Are you okay?"

"It's just—" Jeongguk struggles. "I'm just—what am I even doing? What are *we* even doing?"

Taehyung wishes he has an answer to that. But he doesn't, so he merely sits down next to Jeongguk and taste the silence hanging in the air, two boys trying to stay afloat.

"Go away," Taehyung slurs.

He doesn't know how he ended up here. After last night's attempt to talk with Jeongguk only to realise that neither of them have any fucking clue what they're doing, he knew he needed to get out. To destress, to sit alone at a bar and pretend he isn't Kim Taehyung, pretend he isn't fucking his stepbrother.

The guy currently grabbing him looks familiar. He's too gone, but this—the tall, lean body, the chiseled face—is familiar. It feels like he's seen him before, even when he can barely make out the guy's face through the haze of alcohol.

"Get away from me," Taehyung snaps. But the bar is loud and noisy

and the fight is drained out of him, limbs weak and lifeless.

“Tae,” the person says, and for a moment he thinks it’s Jeongguk—sweet, confused Jeongguk—but then he registers the undercurrent of anger. “Listen to me. You want this.”

“I don’t,” Taehyung says, but he can barely get the words out.

And then Minjae is pulling him away—right, it’s Minjae, he should have known, he should have known that this fucking bastard would find him—and an arm wraps around his shoulders, another around his waist, a guise of care and concern that the bar-goers overlook. No one notices Taehyung struggling in Minjae’s arms, not when he can barely struggle with any sort of strength in the first place.

When they’re outside, he feels the cold slam of concrete against his back and a warm mouth licking at his neck, desperate and eager and urgent, and it would feel great, if not for the fact that he does not want it, not in the least. He doesn’t want the arms grabbing at his face and stomach and everywhere else. He doesn’t want the soft murmurs and promises whispered into his ear. He doesn’t want the bites on his neck that he knows will show up as hickeys the next morning, not because they’ll be hickeys, but because he doesn’t want Minjae.

Mustering the last bit of strength he has, he shoves Minjae away.

“Why won’t you listen to me?” Minjae barks. He grabs Taehyung and slams him against the wall. “Why do you keep ignoring me? Don’t you want me too?”

“I don’t,” Taehyung tries to say, but it comes out as a jumble of words and he can barely see anything clearly now, knows he’s sagging against the wall. A sign of defeat.

And there’s a palm at his crotch and another on his face, grabbing his jaw, and all he can think is fuck, fuck, fuck, he does not want this, not in the slightest. He does not want this but he cannot fight back and he hates it and, oh god, why did he get drunk tonight, why did he not just stay at home and wallow in self pity—and then there’s a feeling of disgust, dirty and dark and bitter, creeping up his stomach and his chest and his throat, and shame dances on his tongue.

He tries. Fucking hell, he tries. His hands clamber to push Minjae away but he’s just as tall and much more sober and *nothing is working*

—and then something does. No, someone does.

Minjae is pulled away from him and everything that happens next is a blur. All he sees and hears, in fuzzy images and muffled noises, is the scene of someone being thrown aside and beaten up and then he feels himself being dragged away for the second, third, fourth time tonight.

But this time, the arms are more familiar, like he'd been in them a million times before. The face is not as sharp as Minjae's—eyes larger and cheeks rounder and top lip practically nonexistent.

“Hyung,” Jeongguk asks, desperate and urgent and worried.

“Taehyung, are you okay?”

“Jeongguk?” Taehyung looks up. The lights are bright. The room is familiar and so is the bed. (The sheets are clean and warm and they smell like mint and chamomile.) “Is that you?”

“Are you okay?” Jeongguk asks again, voice tighter this time. Like there's something in his throat, like he's choking. “Fucking hell, Taehyung, what happened?”

“Thanks, Jeonggukkie,” Taehyung whispers. He still feels the ghost of Minjae's hands all over him and he wants to scrub everything off a thousand times over until he's completely clean and, fuck, he's dirtying Jeongguk's bed, isn't he? But Jeongguk doesn't seem to care a single bit about his bed, he only has eyes for Taehyung—worried and anxious, a crease between his brows.

“Are you okay?”

Jeongguk sounds like he's about to cry, and Taehyung wants to reach out and tell him everything will be okay even though he doesn't have a goddamn clue himself.

“I hope so.”

spring 2016, ii

Jeongguk tries to talk to him. The first time is after Taehyung wakes up again and Jeongguk washes him down in the shower with a cloth and warm water, and he asks, “Do you want to talk about what happened?” (Unsurprisingly, Taehyung doesn’t reply.) The second time is three days later, three full days in which he barely saw Jeongguk at all because the boy was way too busy in the lab, and it’s only at dinnertime when they’re sitting next to each other on the couch, shoulder-to-shoulder and thigh-to-thigh.

Jeongguk turns to him and pulls his mouth thin and asks, “What happened?”

Taehyung’s heart caves in, because he knows there’s no way he can avoid this forever. And this is Jeongguk, he reminds himself. Jeongguk is good and kind and understanding.

It’s dark outside. Winter has long since ebbed away and it’s the midst of spring—Seoul is always temperamental, spring and fall disappear in the blink of an eye and yet the bitter winters and scorching summers linger around for far too long—and the weather is good. A bit windy, a bit chilly, but good. Sweater weather, Taehyung thinks, gaze floating to the window outside instead, where the breeze strikes the glass and sings a song so loud it might as well be an orchestra.

“I’ll tell you,” Taehyung says. It’s a wonder he’s handling this so calmly, he thinks. That one of his friends had tried to (managed to?) sexually assault (grope? molest? rape?) him, and he’s able to somehow bury everything and not care and numb himself. “But first—a smoke.”

It’s a horrible habit, Taehyung knows. He’d try quitting, but there’s nothing like a strong hit of tobacco and tar to get you relaxed and loose.

Jeongguk shrugs in agreement, and Taehyung leads the way to the rooftop this time, already too acquainted with the path. He could walk it blind. He’s been walking it almost blind the past few days, muscle memory carrying him out and up the stairs whenever the memory of fingers burning into his skin—not in a good way, not at all—strikes. It’s almost funny that he uses the smoke of a cigarette to burn that sensation away.

“I’m fucking—” Taehyung mutters, leaning against the railing and

fumbling with the lighter. Holds the cigarette to his mouth and passes one to Jeongguk, then lights it up for both of them. "I'm fucking—I don't know."

He turns around and presses his ribs to the railings, the cold of metal seeping through shirt onto skin. Smoke chases into the night and it's swept away by the wind.

"You're scarily okay," Jeongguk says. His voice is small. It feels like Taehyung can grab it in his palm and throw it into the city. "And that's just really, really fucking scary. I was so scared, you know?" A higher pitch now, louder, the urgency rushing in and colouring his words red. "He was all over you and you couldn't even move properly, you couldn't even *talk* properly, fucking hell. Like, at first, I was—" A pause, a struggle. "—I was angry. I was so angry, and then everything happened and he was on the ground and we were on our way back and I got so *scared*."

Oh, god. Jeongguk's hands are shaking now, fingers trembling around the circumference of the cigarette. The wind bites at his hair and his cheeks are pink even in the dark, and it sounds like there's something lodged in his throat.

"But you're—you're not even reacting." Jeongguk is almost whining, tone exasperated and confused and frustrated, and all Taehyung wants to do is gather him into his arms. "I thought I was supposed to be the shitty stoic one. And, I don't know, you seem okay, but are you, really?"

Is he, really? Taehyung doesn't know. Taehyung doesn't *want* to know, because the one thing he knows is that if he tries finding out, he will probably break. Fair enough, he wasn't that close to Minjae (not in the ways he was close to Jimin, not in the ways he was close to Jeongguk), but to know that someone you trusted just completely changed—it's hard. Even if the signs were there, even if Taehyung was perceptive enough to catch onto those signs—it's unexpected.

And, fuck, he needs another cigarette, because this one is burning away as fast and hard as his resolve. Because the feeling of someone else's hands on his body, someone else's mouth on his neck—someone he doesn't want, someone who's not Jeongguk—is just uncomfortable.

"I don't know," Taehyung admits. He doesn't dare to look at Jeongguk. "Maybe I'm suppressing it, or something. Sometimes I feel hands on my skin—phantoms, or ghosts, or something. All over,

sometimes soft and caressing and other times, grabbing and pulling, and I can't move. And I can't get rid of it. Then I force myself to forget about it, or I'll come out for a smoke, and then poof!" He turns to Jeongguk and laughs, but it doesn't reach his eyes. He can't make it reach his eyes. "It's gone. For a few minutes, a few hours. But it always comes back. I'm not traumatised or anything, I don't feel scared or anxious or, I don't know. It's just weird."

As soon as he finishes, he looks down into the city and the feeling is back. He wants to shrink away into himself, but the problem is, his own body is the problem. He can't cave into himself any more than he already has. All he can do is take another drag and ignore.

Jeongguk's hand hovers over his back—he can't see it, but he can feel it, just as he can feel all of Jeongguk, a warmth presence beside him—and slowly, hesitantly, settles on a shoulder. Taehyung knows the hesitation is not because Taehyung is dirty, he's rational enough to know that. Logical enough. But that doesn't stop the thought from creeping into his head, not the slightest bit. So he cringes, and Jeongguk draws his hand back like he's touched a hot stove.

"No, it's—I'm okay," Taehyung reassures him. "It's just reflex."

"I want to touch you." At this, Taehyung pulls a face, one that screams 'what the fuck did you just say' and 'I am confused' all at once. Jeongguk reddens. "No, no, that's not what I mean. As in—I want to hug you? Make you feel safe? Oh, god, this is coming out horribly." If possible, he turns even redder. "I just want you to be comfortable. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have tried."

It makes Taehyung's warm all over, that Jeongguk's even *trying*, that he's gone from stoic little shit when they first met to someone who's actually concerned about Taehyung. Granted, they have known each other for a while now, but still. It's nice.

"It's okay, Gukkie," Taehyung smiles. It's genuine, this time. It reaches his eyes. Maybe he won't be able to forget so quickly or so easily, but he has time and he has Jeongguk, and that's really all he needs.

Everything takes time, Taehyung knows, but he doesn't have very much of it. School is starting to kick into gear again, assignments

flooding in, midterms looming on the horizon. It's almost a blessing that he can focus on something else that's almost as confusing as whatever happened on that night. Maybe avoidance isn't the best tactic. Maybe Jeongguk is right, but it's the easiest. No one can deny that.

The third night is the worst. As he's curled up in the couch with a few cans of Red Bull on one side and a coffee on the other, wind strikes the glass with a vengeance. Thunder claps and lightning flashes across the sky. The windows rattle and shake, and Taehyung freezes.

"Fuck." He closes his eyes. This isn't good. Thunderstorms aren't good. He likes rain well enough, but not when the boom of a storm accompanies it. "Fuck, not now."

And then it comes, adding fuel to the fire, that creeping sensation across his skin. He wants to curl into the couch but he knows it's not enough, it's nowhere near enough. The clock has struck two long ago and the living room is quiet, Jeongguk is asleep for an eight am class and there's no one and there's no one, nobody at all.

And it's dark. It's dark, the only light coming from the dim fluorescent lamp by the coffee table and the glare of his phone, a feeble attempt at saving on their electricity bill. It's dark and cold and the windows are shaking from the sheer force and, god, there it is again, lightning striking across a midnight sky and it's so near, thunder following almost immediately after. A long, drawn out whistle of wind against the windows, twisting Taehyung's stomach so hard and so tight he can barely breathe, the hair on his skin rising.

And, fuck, if he'd thought that the thunder would bring him away from Minjae, it doesn't. It doesn't, fucking hell, it merely emphasises the fact that phantom fingers dance across his skin—no, they don't dance, they *tear* across his skin, pushing and prodding and stretching out everywhere, and Taehyung has nowhere to go.

He barely notices he's whimpering, curled as he is into a foetal position, forehead pushing against his knees so hard he's sure there will be a red mark on his temple the next morning.

"Taehyung?" Jeongguk asks. His voice is groggy and far away. "Are you alright?"

And Taehyung can't see, because he's too busy staring into the dark crevice between his kneecaps, too busy trying to draw into himself so he can escape from anything and everything, but he knows. He can

sense Jeongguk's presence—his breathing, the urgent undercurrent in his voice, the footsteps that make their way across the wooden flooring.

Something curls into his back—a warm chest, the caress of hair against his neck, a silent promise hanging in the air that whispers *I will keep you safe*—and he leans into it.

“Tae,” Jeongguk whispers, soft and safe. “Tae, I’m here.”

“I’m not usually—” Taehyung chokes. “I’m usually okay, I don’t know why it’s like this.”

“You don’t have to explain.” A pause. “Not now, at least.”

“No, really, I’m sorry for—for being like this. I don’t like thunderstorms but it’s not usually this bad, I don’t know, it feels like fucking *hands* all over me—”

Jeongguk doesn’t say anything. But he takes Taehyung into his chest, wraps his arms around Taehyung’s body. He presses his forehead to Taehyung’s back, just a little above where his heart is, and breathes kisses into his spine. Feather-light, barely kisses at all, just the soft outline of Jeongguk’s small mouth through Taehyung’s shirt.

They stay like this for the rest of the night. Through the storm and the wind and the spiders across Taehyung’s skin, they stay there, carved into each other.

The calm comes before the storm, and after a week of episodes where ghost hands trailed across his skin, a week of him sneaking into Jeongguk’s room in the middle of the night so that he can press up against a warm body that actually keeps him safe, he’s angry. It’s not sudden. The episodes fade away, more and more sporadic, along with the calm. And now, it’s no longer a synthetic numbness flowing through his veins—it’s anger, it’s frustration.

He’s pissed off. He wants to look for Minjae, but the bastard isn’t answering his texts or calls, and he’s skipped all their lectures this week. Taehyung briefly considers going to Secret Society just to fuck Minjae up, ask him what the fuck was he thinking and how on earth

he even thought that was vaguely okay, but he figures that Minjae is not worth the effort.

He's lucky, he thinks. That he can handle this with numbness and then with anger and only the slightest bit of panic, of worry. Not everyone has the luxury of being able to gloss over an incident like this and emerge relatively okay, save for the insurmountable anger brewing in his chest. He wants to—he wants to cuss Minjae out, clarify what the fuck was going on, and if he isn't so against violence, he'd have no qualms about punching the Drama-slash-Business Major (what does he even study, anyway? does he even go here?) in the nose. The very thought of Minjae makes his blood boil.

And it shows. Taehyung doesn't usually wear his heart on his sleeve but when you're literally shaking from head to toe in anger, it's hard not to let anything show.

"Why are you so on edge?" Jimin says through a mouthful of a sad tuna kimbap. "I can practically hear you angsting from here."

Taehyung bristles. He narrows his eyes, offended, but decides that he's better off telling Jimin instead of dragging it out and inevitably ending up with a very indignant best friend, one that will ignore Taehyung for all of three hours for not telling him something as important as this. When he's done relaying the events, Jimin is predictably angry. No, he's *pissed*, maybe even more so than Taehyung, fingernails pressing into the heart of his palms, knuckles clenched and white.

"What the fuck?" Jimin cries. His kimbap lies sad and half-eaten on the table, long forgotten. Lips curled back and body tensed, poised to fight. "What the actual fuck? Who's this Minjae kid? Where is he and how can I kill him?"

On one hand, Taehyung heart warms at the sight of his friend ready to fight for his honour. But on the other, a Pissed Off Jimin is a very, very scary Jimin who should never be let out into the wild under any and all circumstances, so he wraps his fingers around the boy's wrist and pulls him back down into his seat. There's the slightest bit of resistance before Jimin gives, and when he sits back down, he's still radiating with anger.

"At first I was numb," Taehyung explains. He hisses in a breath. "I couldn't feel anything afterward. It was—it was weird, but now I'm just angry and fucking confused? Like, what the hell?"

“Oh my god,” Jimin snarls. Taehyung’s never seen him so agitated before. “I really, really need to hit something right now. This fucking kid better hope he never shows his face around here.” And it takes a while longer, maybe a minute more, maybe two, but Jimin gradually steadies. He steels his gaze. “Taehyung, you need to report this.”

Taehyung startles. “Wait, what?”

“You should report him,” Jimin urges. “Look, he tried it with you, anyone else could be next. He *sexually assaulted* you, Tae. He’s dangerous.”

“I’ll think about it,” Taehyung slumps. It’s an appealing idea, the thought of throwing Minjae to the wolves that will give him a worse punishment than the result of whatever residual taekwondo knowledge Taehyung still has from ten years ago, but that would mean getting involved all over again. All he wants to do is kick Minjae’s ass and leave it be.

But it’s a thought that lingers in his mind, and that very night, he’s browsing through the school website, trying to look up just how the hell someone is supposed to go about reporting these sorts of things.

“Hyung,” Jeongguk says, voice floating over from the kitchen. It’s strange. He’s taken to calling Taehyung ‘hyung’ these days, and while Taehyung can’t say he dislikes it, it’s so different from the usual, informal ‘Taehyung’ that he can’t help but feel his stomach churn. “What’re you doing?”

“Trying to find out how I’m supposed to report Minjae,” Taehyung manages through clenched teeth. The Yonsei University website is notoriously difficult to navigate, and it sucks.

Jeongguk sneaks up behind him and crouches down to the ground, rests his chin on Taehyung’s shoulder, and looks over at the laptop. He keeps his hands to himself, no wandering fingers, but his warm chest is pressed up against the curve of Taehyung’s spine and Taehyung can’t help but lean into it, tilting his head toward Jeongguk’s.

Jeongguk reaches over, arms stretching past Taehyung’s torso to grab at the mouse. And he tries, he really tries, maybe he can actually learn how to do this on his own. But Jeongguk’s skin brushes against his own with each small movement, and god, this is so—this is so embarrassing, that mere skin contact can make Taehyung’s heart thrum against his ribcage and make him blush like a sixteen-year old.

“Here you go.” Jeongguk is proud. “Report away.” And he moves backward, like he hadn’t just plastered himself against Taehyung for the better part of five minutes.

Jeongguk leaves to shower. When Taehyung hears the telltale shutting of a door, he drops his gaze to the semi in his pants and groans out loud.

“You know what? It’s midterms soon and I have four papers due this week, I cannot be fucked to bother with Minjae any more.” Taehyung pulls at his hair. “But, what the actual fuck? Apparently Kim Minjae isn’t even a fucking *student* at Yonsei?”

At this, Jeongguk, who had been lounging on the sofa, legs thrown over the armrests, jolts upright.

He narrows his eyes. “What?”

“Exactly,” Taehyung groans, frustrated. “The school replied me, and they said no such person exists in the registry.”

A contemplative look passes over Jeongguk’s face. “You said he was a Drama major, right?”

“Or Business major, I don’t know, he always changed his story.” Taehyung is pissed. Taehyung is more than pissed. Taehyung is downright furious, and he’s furious and confused and upset. “Probably because he doesn’t even *have* a major, because he doesn’t even go here.”

Jeongguk grabs his phone and fiddles with it for a few minutes. Then the concentration on his face fades, gives way to something cold.

“Taehyung,” Jeongguk says, slow and measured and heavy. “I just checked with some of my friends from Business and Drama. They’ve never seen him in their classes.” Taehyung is about to interrupt, but Jeongguk puts up a hand and continues, “But they’ve seen him around school. Not just at Yonsei, but Sogang and Hongdae too.”

Taehyung sinks into his seat. Fucking hell, he can’t deal with this. The school has already taken note—his name probably isn’t even Minjae—

and said that they will take the necessary actions, but there's no way anyone can chase ghosts. It's just not possible.

"Fucking hell," Taehyung groans, rubbing his palms against his temple. He can't deal with this. He's got exams to study for and papers to write.

And when Jeongguk moves to Taehyung's end of the couch and wraps his arms around Taehyung, it comes as a surprise. A pleasant one, the feel of arms winding around his body and caging him in with warmth, the press of a mouth to the back of his neck, and the lull of a soft voice putting him to sleep.

It's a little funny, the way life works. When you've left home and found a new one, everything moves so fast and swift and zooms by in the blink of an eye, what plagued you a week ago is now relegated to the back of your mind. It's not that Taehyung doesn't care about what happened with Minjae any more—it's that he literally *can't*, he doesn't have the energy or time to chase after the shadow of a ghost.

He has too many papers due and he's got three midterms next week. It's two-thirty on a Thursday night (morning?) and he's still cooped up in the living area, books scattered around him, the glare from his laptop killing his eyes slowly but surely.

"Jeongguk," Taehyung says. "Smoke break?"

It might already be two-thirty, but for a university student, the night is still young. There's nothing quite like killing yourself with coffee and cigarettes on a weekday night, the city sprawled out beneath you.

"Hyung." Jeongguk presses closer, turns to look at him with those giant doe eyes, biting his bottom lip. "Our crew's having a showcase this weekend. Do you wanna come?"

Taehyung smiles and nudges the younger boy with his hip. "Do you even need to ask?"

This is nice, Taehyung thinks. It's still spring but starting to get warmer, just the slightest bit, the temperature inching its way up each day. A cigarette between his fingers, the heat of tobacco filling his

chest with warmth. Jeongguk beside him, elbow pressing against elbow, his face barely a silhouette against the night sky. Taehyung wants—Taehyung wants to trace it with his fingers, run his thumb across the slope of Jeongguk’s nose, along his jawline, press the tips of his fingers into cherry-red lips. He swallows, and looks away.

Maybe Jeongguk’s actually psychic, or maybe he knows Taehyung from the inside out just as Taehyung knows him, because the next thing he knows, Jeongguk’s stubbing the cigarette and leaning in and he’s close, he’s so close it makes Taehyung’s heart hurt.

“Taehyung,” Jeongguk whispers, a hair’s breadth and a lifetime away, “is this okay?”

His lips move to form words, rounding and unrounding with each syllable, a few centimeters’ gap between them. Taehyung can’t help but want to feel the curve of those lips against his.

“Yeah, it is,” Taehyung breathes, and with a hand on the back of Jeongguk’s neck, pulls them together.

Maybe it’s a trademark of theirs by now, Taehyung thinks, that they both taste like cigarettes when their tongues meld together. Like cigarettes, of course, but with that hint of mint and chamomile and the espresso that Taehyung had downed not even a half hour ago. Like something familiar yet forbidden, the slick warmth of another mouth around his, hands dipping underneath Jeongguk’s shirt to trace across the hard plane of his stomach (because it’s finally, finally warm enough to do this outside).

And when his hand creeps nearer the tent in Jeongguk’s pants, Jeongguk stops him. Wraps his fingers around Taehyung’s wrist and stills.

“We should get back in first,” Jeongguk says. He squeezes his eyes shut like it takes him all the world to say those words. “Still have to finish those papers, yeah?”

Taehyung is confused. But when he sees the look of guilt in Jeongguk’s eyes, like he’s touched Taehyung the wrong way—like he’d touched Taehyung *too soon*, too soon after dragging him half-dead from an alleyway with hickeys and bruises all over his body—Taehyung understands.

And ten minutes later, they’re back in the living room. They’ve given up on trying to turn all the lights on, instead opting to live off of the

glare of their laptops and the single, weak lamp sitting on the side table. Taehyung's got his head in Jeongguk's lap, fingers fiddling around with the newest rhythm game on his phone, but Jeongguk's actually trying to study, brows furrowed as he types away at his lab report, keys clicking in tandem with the occasional groan of frustration.

This game is shit, Taehyung thinks. He's losing badly and he doesn't want to go back to doing work. He lets out a large sigh and turns his face to the side, only to meet with Jeongguk's crotch.

An idea hits, one that he hopes will let Jeongguk understand that everything is okay, now. That he is okay. So he nuzzles his nose into Jeongguk's lap again—on purpose, this time—and groans out loud, as if whining, burying his nose deeper into the folds of Jeongguk's sweatpants.

"Hyung," Jeongguk asks, voice low. The rapid typing has long since stopped. "What are you trying to do?"

Taehyung pauses. Tilts his head upwards and flashes the brightest grin he can muster.

"This," he replies, before his hands come up to grab at Jeongguk's hips. He slides upward and into Jeongguk's lap, but not before briefly mouthing at Jeongguk's cock through the cloth and delighting in the groan that escapes from the younger.

"Are you sure?" Jeongguk asks, breathes heavy but measured. His pupils are dilated and his cheeks are red and Taehyung loves it. "Are you sure you're ready? That you're okay?"

"I'm okay," Taehyung says. He leans forward and lands a peck on Jeongguk's mouth. "Really. I'm okay. And I want this."

Jeongguk nods, and that is all the affirmation Taehyung needs to switch their positions around, pressing Jeongguk into the couch. As if on instinct, Jeongguk's legs open up to accommodate Taehyung between them, lightly thrusting upward, and the jolt of adrenaline that hits Taehyung with each soft roll of Jeongguk's hips sends Taehyung's mind whirling.

He continues peppering kisses down Jeongguk's neck, across his collarbones. Sucking and biting and licking, relishing in the small whimpers coming out from Jeongguk's mouth.

“Take it off,” Taehyung says against Jeongguk’s exposed hipbone, more a command than anything.

And then they’re both half-naked, skin against skin, mouth against mouth. Taehyung can’t tell where he ends and Jeongguk begins, but he doesn’t really need to. Not really, not at all.

Not when Jeongguk presses his heels into the couch and arches up into Taehyung so hard, rolling his pelvis against Taehyung’s in the most horrible manner possible. Not when Taehyung looks down for the barest fraction of a second and sees Jeongguk glistening beneath him, lips plump and pouty and red, the beginnings of more than a few hickeys forming on his pale skin, the ridges of his abdominals obvious even in the dark.

Taehyung moves downward, mouthing at the tent in Jeongguk’s sweatpants. Experimentally, almost kittenish, he sucks at the tip through the cloth. With a loud groan, Jeongguk’s tightens his fingers in Taehyung’s hair.

“Fucking tease,” Jeongguk groans, throwing his head back into the seat of the couch. “Are you gonna suck me off or not?”

“Option A, I suck you off,” Taehyung begins, pulling away and nuzzling at Jeongguk’s cock. “Option B, I eat you out,” he continues, moving northward toward Jeongguk’s hip and pulling his waistband down together with his boxers, Jeongguk’s cock springing upward and curving toward his stomach. “Or option C, I suck you off, I eat you out, and then I fuck you.”

The whine that Jeongguk lets out makes Taehyung’s heart skip a beat. The electricity surging through to his toes wherever they touch becomes that much stronger. Everything is heat, warmth, a thousand suns exploding inside him because this is Jeongguk—not some nameless fuck, but Jeongguk, the boy with doe eyes and pretty lips and a penchant for saying too much shit when he’s not drunk on sex.

So Taehyung gives in, because he has never really been able to say no to Jeongguk. He gives in, goes back down, takes Jeongguk in whole and sucks, fingertips pressing into Jeongguk’s hipbones. Then he licks around Jeongguk’s hole, around the rim, not actually diving in until Jeongguk whines (“Hyung, just fuck me already, fucking hell.”) and Taehyung is hard. Jeongguk hasn’t even touched him and he’s already hard, so hard, just from sucking Jeongguk off and eating him out and watching his pretty little lips part to let out the prettiest of groans into

the air, the sounds echoing throughout the silent apartment, lewd even to Taehyung's own ears.

"Wait," Jeongguk breathes. He glances down at Taehyung with half-lidded eyes and this is when Taehyung knows that he's gone. "I don't want to come like this."

Taehyung resurfaces, withdraws a finger out from Jeongguk and watches as the younger sucks in a breath, hisses at the loss. He slides his body up against Jeongguk's and says against his mouth, "How do you want to come?"

"I want you inside me." Jeongguk swallows, like it's the first time he's ever said something like this. For a moment, Taehyung thinks he will close his eyes, but then he steels himself and stares straight into Taehyung. "I want you to fuck me."

His words send a surge of heat down to Taehyung's cock, and so, Taehyung does. He slides into Jeongguk and fucks into Jeongguk, presses the younger into the couch, meeting Jeongguk thrust for thrust. Heels dig into his lower back and he knows, he just knows, he will have bruises the next day. And the whole time, he presses his face into Jeongguk's neck, the pale, graceful neck that Jeongguk has thrown backward and exposed for Taehyung, mouthing at the one spot beneath Jeongguk's ear.

It's hot and sweaty and sticky, the sound of skin against skin, of heavy breaths and loud groans and high-pitched whines filling the air. It's downright lewd and Jeongguk is so warm and tight around him, Jeongguk is so loud, it's a wonder no one's complaining.

He adjusts the angle, and when Jeongguk moans outright, he knows he's hit a spot. The prostate, maybe, or a deeper angle, but whatever it is—Jeongguk's legs tighten around his waist and he knows to keep going.

"Fuck, hyung," Jeongguk groans. When Taehyung pulls at his hair, he sinks his teeth into his bottom lip to prevent another moan. "I'm close."

Taehyung continues thrusting, harder this time. Harder, faster, so that he can bring Jeongguk to the edge and tip him over.

"Jeongguk," Taehyung whispers, just as he tugs again—this time lighter, not as strong, but that's all Jeongguk needs, and he comes hard, come landing on his stomach and a long, drawn-out moan

escaping his lips. Barely a few seconds later, Taehyung comes too, a shock of heat and adrenaline and endorphins accompanying the orgasm, body falling onto Jeongguk's.

He pulls out and shifts to the side, and they lay like this for the next few minutes. Body against body, skin against skin. Taehyung can hear Jeongguk's heartbeat beneath his own, the rhythm that runs in tandem with each breath, with each rise and fall of the ribcage.

"Thank you," Taehyung says, after what feels like a couple of lifetimes. He doesn't know what he's thanking Jeongguk for. Maybe for saving him from Minjae, maybe for accompanying him through late nights and too much coffee, maybe for staying with him and keeping him warm and keeping him *safe*. "Thank you, Gukkie."

Taehyung doesn't look to his side, doesn't look to Jeongguk. Doesn't *dare* to look to Jeongguk, because he knows that if he does, his heart will crumble and he doesn't know if he can handle that.

And Jeongguk doesn't reply, not a single word, but he rolls over and wraps one arm around Taehyung's shoulders and another around his waist. Throws one leg across Taehyung's, tangling their limbs together. Presses his mouth to Taehyung's shoulder and sears a promise into skin, a promise that Taehyung holds onto with all that he has.

spring 2016, iii

Once midterm hell is over, Taehyung has at most three weeks to play around, and he's not about to waste a single second. The moment his last exam finishes, he fumbles for his phone and texts Jeongguk to meet him at Hongdae. It's a Thursday afternoon and the streets are nowhere as crowded as they usually are. Jeongguk's probably thinking what the hell Taehyung's trying to do, but he will go along anyway, Taehyung knows.

"Hyung, what's that?" Jeongguk asks, slow and very, very slightly suspicious.

"My new guitar," Taehyung announces proudly. He taps at the fretboard twice in what he hopes is a loving manner. "His name is Seagull."

"You had an old guitar?" Jeongguk raises his brows. "Wait, you can *play* the guitar?"

"Kind of?" Taehyung shrugs, adjusting the guitar strap. It's digging into his neck and not at all comfortable. He should really get a guitar bag. "I haven't played in a while but you just gotta trust in muscle memory."

The street is big and wide, lined with stores on the side and artificial graffiti murals on the other. It's the street that buskers usually perform at on the weekends, dancers covering the latest pop song or another starving artist handing out caricatures for a decent fee, but for now, it's empty. They sit down on a ledge and Taehyung tells Jeongguk his plan: they will play music, they will busk, and they will have fun.

"But why?" Jeongguk asks. He seems keen enough, if a little hesitant. But from the music that's always blasting from his room and the earphones permanently glued to his ears whenever he's not talking to Taehyung, Taehyung's pretty sure Jeongguk likes music as much as he does.

Taehyung grins. "Why not?"

It takes him a while to coax Jeongguk's voice out from his throat, and he's this close to prying the younger boy's lips open with his own fingers when Jeongguk finally gives in. (Taehyung pretends he's not disappointed.)

He grabs Jeongguk's phone and browses through the most played songs, settling on Zion.T's Yanghwa Bridge, which sits at a comfortable third position. Jeongguk has a nice enough voice when talking, smooth and soft, runs over his skin like fairy dust. And when he finally sings, Taehyung's heart sings too.

"Jeon Jeongguk!" Taehyung splutters, pausing halfway through the riff to squeeze Jeongguk's cheeks because *how the fuck*— "Why didn't you tell me you could sing?"

"I can't, not really," Jeongguk says, voice muffled by the way Taehyung's pinching his face.

"You liar," Taehyung hisses. He narrows his eyes. "I can never trust you ever again."

"Really, I'm not that good of a singer," Jeongguk insists. When Taehyung takes his hands away, his face is still red. "I just sing sometimes. Super occasionally."

"You're just unfair, honestly," Taehyung whines. He really is. He can play sports, dance, sing, ace his exams, and on top of all that, he's fucking hot. Maybe more than a little emotionally constipated, but that can be worked on.

Again, this bears repeating: it's a Thursday afternoon, and the streets of Hongdae are unusually quiet. But, given everything, people stop. No faces that Taehyung recognizes, thankfully, but the audience is nice enough and kind enough, drawn in by the breathy lull of Jeongguk's tenor. Taehyung fumbles a bit with the music, fingers stiff from months of disuse, but he skips over the mistakes as if they never happened.

It's at the bridge of another Big Bang song that Taehyung finally turns and looks. Looks to the side, and watches the afternoon sun catch on Jeongguk's face. Watches the light slope across his nose and reflect in his eyes.

The song finishes, and the audience claps. The sun hits just as Jeongguk breaks out into a wide smile, and the breeze latches onto his bangs. And Taehyung—Taehyung's heart catches in his throat.

"How was it, hyung?"

The crowd has long since dispersed and they're packing everything up. Jeongguk turns to Taehyung with an expectant look, smile small and

shy but threatening to burst, just teetering on the edge of so wide it can no longer fit onto his face. And his eyes, they're shining. Hands tucked into the front pockets of his hoodie, tugging the hem all the way down, so low that it stretches against his collarbone and reveals the slight dip between his neck and shoulder.

Taehyung wants to answer. Taehyung *needs* to answer, and the words are right there, balancing on the tip of his tongue, but nothing comes out. He looks at Jeongguk and falters, the same way he's faltered for the past—fuck, he has no clue, it feels like it's been forever.

Something heavy weighs in his chest. Their gazes catch and it's as if time has stopped. The way the corners of Jeongguk's mouth freeze, the way he tilts his head to the side and stops right there.

"You were good, Jeongguk." Taehyung gulps. It takes everything he has to look away. "You were great."

Taehyung hasn't seen Jimin in a while, not with exams chasing after them and the fact that they're in two separate faculties, so when he sees his best friend again, it's like a breath of fresh air. Jimin has that effect, Taehyung thinks. He doesn't walk—he bounces, he skips and glides, leaving sunshine in his wake, the smile on his face reaching all the way to his eyes.

"Jimin!" Taehyung greets, flashing a smile of his own. "How were midterms?"

"Ugh, don't talk about it," Jimin groans. He looks around the coffee shop for a few seconds, taking in the lunchtime crowd, before settling down opposite Taehyung. "All I can do is pray to the bell curve gods."

Taehyung laughs. He misses his best friend. Not just because of exams, but because he now spends more time with Yoongi and Hoseok than ever before and as happy as it makes him to see his best friend happy, there's a tinge of jealousy that he gets less than half the time Jimin spends with his boyfriends.

A game of rock paper scissors sends Taehyung to the counter. The barista's crouched beneath the cashier, doing god knows what, but the voice that comes out is familiar: "Hold on a second!"

It's breathy, a little high, and would sound great singing any Zion.T song on the streets of Hongdae. Who would've thought?

Taehyung leans over the countertop, peers downward, and plasters the largest smile he can muster. When Mysterious Barista looks up for a split second, surprise passes across his face and stays there, but it's not nearly enough to stop him from jerking upward and almost clocking Taehyung's chin with his forehead.

"Tae?" Jeongguk asks. His eyes are as wide and round as plates, pretty mouth dropped open in a small 'o'. "What are you doing here?"

"This is a coffee shop, and I am here to shop for coffee," Taehyung explains. He narrows his eyes. "What are *you* doing here? Why are you working? Why didn't you tell me you're working?"

Maybe it's a bit presumptive of him to assume that Jeongguk should care that Taehyung cares, but Taehyung's a little too miffed to care about his dignity right now. He doesn't have to know *everything* that goes on in Jeongguk's life, but the fact that he works part-time as a barista at one of the nicest, homeliest cafes Taehyung has ever been to is pretty damn important, Taehyung thinks.

(Fine, he'll admit that he's being the slightest bit possessive. But they are friends, they are roommates. They've been close—he likes to think they *are* close—in more ways than one, and their parents are about to get married.

...oh, right. Their parents are about to get married.)

"I'm just trying to earn some extra cash," Jeongguk admits.

He smiles at Taehyung. A shy one, no teeth, no gum. And, for all his height and muscle and lethal jawline, Jeongguk simply looks small.

With the black apron tied around his waist and beanie on his head and that same, oversized white shirt, he looks small. He looks small and sweet, and Taehyung wants to gather him into his arms and hold his hand and wake up to his face in the morning. And when Taehyung feels the strong urge to lean forward and peck Jeongguk on the cheek—not a kiss, not a makeout, just a simple peck—he knows he's been staring for far too long.

"Hyung?" Jeongguk asks again, brows furrowed this time. When he tilts his head to the side in a questioning gesture, the hoops of his earrings follow with the movement, and the silver glints. "You okay?"

“Yeah, I’m good,” Taehyung reassures. He musters a small smile and hopes it doesn’t come out as a grimace. “I’m here with Jimin. His papers finally ended yesterday so we’re out to catch up. Want to join us when your shift’s over?”

“I don’t knock off till four,” Jeongguk points out. Taehyung looks at his watch, and realises it’s only one. “For being an Economics major, you’re not very good with numbers.”

Taehyung sighs and pretends to be offended. “Oh, you wound me so, Jeongguk.”

Then Jeongguk smiles, and Taehyung thinks this is the happiest he’s seen Jeongguk in a long time. “Order before a line starts to form, please.”

“I’ll have an iced Americano and a caramel latte, please. Thank you Barista-ssi.” Taehyung bows with a flourish.

Jeongguk rolls his eyes and there’s a tug at the corner of his lip, but other than that, he doesn’t react much. “Right away, Kim Taehyung-ssi.” He keys in the order and tells Taehyung to wait. When Taehyung’s about to leave with his drinks, he adds, “Tell Jimin-hyung I said hi!”

“We’re sitting our asses here till four, and you’re telling him yourself.”

He heads back to the table and places their drinks on the surface. Jimin sips on his latte with a small thanks, leans across and toward Taehyung, and asks, “Was that Jeongguk?”

“Yeah, Gukkie’s been working here and I only found out today.” Taehyung tries to stop it, but even he can hear the pout in his voice. “He’s getting off at four if you’re okay with hanging out after.”

“Nah, I have dance practice.” There’s a twinkle in Jimin’s eyes, and it’s nothing short of scary. “You two have your own fun.”

“What are you talking about?”

Jimin purses his lips and glares, like he’s completely and utterly disappointed in his best friend, before rapidly scrolling through his phone. He shows it to Taehyung; seems like he’s pulled up a video on Instagram, one that has well over two thousand likes.

Oh, it's this. Taehyung recognises this. He would recognise the cobbled streets and the smooth voice anywhere.

"Why didn't you tell me you guys went busking?" Jimin whines. He pouts, and then tries to sneer, but it's more adorable than anything. "I could've created some fanchants! Look, you're almost viral too."

"It was an impulse thing," Taehyung insists. "And it was a Thursday. You have dance on Thursdays."

"I have dance every day, but that didn't stop you from asking me out today, did it?"

Taehyung sighs and reaches forward to ruffle Jimin's hair—he's gotten a haircut and had it bleached again, though the colour difference is barely noticeable—and continues watching the video.

It's the second verse of their cover of Eat by Zion.T, and from the looks of it, probably the third time they're playing it. Video Taehyung is more comfortable with the guitar now, fingers moving across the strings with a kind of practised ease. Video Jeongguk, too, smiles as he sings, even closes his eyes on occasion and adds in the occasional adlib.

But when Taehyung looks again, really looks, he sees something else. They're not just playing for the audience—they're playing for *each other*. As he plays the guitar, he's staring at Jeongguk; but the moment Jeongguk turns toward him, his head whips away to the other side, gaze steadfast at a point on the ground. But Jeongguk doesn't seem to mind, and he just keeps looking at Taehyung. Not really *staring*, per se, but it's as if he can't tear his eyes away from Taehyung, and he doesn't particularly want to.

Even when a larger crowd begins to gather, Jeongguk's still looking at Taehyung. And then Taehyung looks up, for the slightest, smallest moment. They lock eyes for all of two seconds before the video cuts short.

"Do you see it?"

Taehyung stills. "See what?"

"Do you see the way he looks at you? Do you see the way you look at him?"

He closes his eyes and slides the phone across the table. "What are

you trying to say?”

“I’m saying, be careful.” Taehyung opens his eyes, and Jimin’s looking at him with care and concern and, if he digs hard enough, the tiniest hint of pity. “I don’t know what kind of fucking arrangement—ha, *fucking arrangement*—you guys have going on, but you’re still going to be stepbrothers. If it’s just sex, that’s fine. But it doesn’t look like just sex.”

“It is just sex,” Taehyung argues, but even he can hear the lack of fight. “We’re friends that have sex. Really good sex.”

Jimin leans back into his chair and sighs.

“He looks at you like you’re the only thing in the world, and you look at him like he’s the only thing in the world that makes you happy.”

Words have never really affected Taehyung. He’s always been able to tune them out, to select the ones that hurt and cast them aside. But what Jimin says sticks with him, and it keeps nagging at him wherever he goes. It’s made even worse by the fact that wherever he goes, he’s usually accompanied by Jeongguk.

Then again, dying while running along the Han River was his idea, even if it was because he’d been subtly nudged toward the fitspo life by Jeongguk.

(“Tae, if you keep licking my abs, why don’t you get some of your own?”

“Why would I want to?”

“So I can lick yours, obviously.”)

Jeongguk had said those words and heat shot down to Taehyung’s cock almost immediately, but he’d taken Jeongguk up on that offer. And two days later, they were at Yeouido Park, decked out in sweatpants and t-shirts, ready to take on the world. Okay, maybe not quite. They were ready to take on part of the southern bank of the Han River.

“Come on, it’s only been twenty minutes.” Jeongguk’s trying to be encouraging, Taehyung can tell, but it’s not really working. “You can do this.”

“Yeah, it’s only been twenty minutes. Twenty minutes of *hell*,” Taehyung snaps. But he trudges along anyway, because if he stops he will be a burden and he hates being a burden. “Oh, god, I think I’m going to die.”

“You’re not going to die, you’re running.”

“Exactly, I’m dying. Thanks for pointing it out.”

The way Jeongguk keeps with him even though he can go much faster and further, stays right by him, is sweet. It makes Taehyung melt inside, how Jeongguk will jog on the spot and encourage Taehyung and slow down whenever there’s a dog passing by, their owners following closely behind. How he’s patient and supportive and doesn’t leave Taehyung behind no matter what.

Taehyung melts inside, and he’s overcome with a sudden need to wrap his arms around Jeongguk’s waist. It’s weird. Usually, he just really wants to wrap his body around Jeongguk, maybe fuck into him a couple of times before collapsing in a heap of sweat and come. Not this...whatever this is.

Whatever. *Don’t think too much of it*, he tells himself. Maybe if he ignores it, it will go away.

Another ten minutes, and they finally finish their run. Taehyung shouts as they make their way to a bench (“*Freedom!*”) and collapses onto it. His spine is stiff against the wooden surface and it’s so uncomfortable, but the sky is nice and pretty and his lungs are finally alive again.

“Ugh, now your sweat’s all over the seat,” Jeongguk hisses. “That’s gross.”

“*You’re* gross,” Taehyung retorts, but he sits up anyway. As if on instinct, he leans his head on Jeongguk’s shoulder. “Seriously though, thanks for the run. I think I needed that. This whole sedentary lifestyle thing is making me really sedentary.”

“A sedentary lifestyle making you *sedentary*?” Jeongguk fake-gasps. “I never would have thought.”

“Wow, such sass, much sarcasm,” Taehyung praises. “Seven out of ten.”

They stay there for a long while. They stay there till the afternoon sun begins to really heat up and beat down on them, and Jeongguk shoves at Taehyung to get up so they can head back and peel off the gross, sweaty shirts and hop into the shower (and have some really good shower sex, of course).

And when they get up and Taehyung naturally keens into Jeongguk as they walk back, when Taehyung instinctively reaches for Jeongguk’s hand and leans forward to press a kiss to Jeongguk’s cheek, when Jeongguk blushes ten different shades of red—Taehyung knows he’s fucked.

When the lull between midterms and finals finally sets in, Jimin and Hoseok somehow manage to convince everyone to skip their Friday classes so that they can make a short getaway to Sokcho. There’s a bit of protest from Yoongi and Jeongguk and even Namjoon, but in the end, everyone gives in, because no matter how much they whine, they know that a break is very much needed.

It starts off like this: Seokjin borrows a pickup truck from some friend (“I dragged his drunken ass back to my house and he had the fuckin’ gall to puke all over my sofa. He owes me.”) and they set off on Thursday night. Perhaps not the smartest or safest of times, but Korea is safe enough, and the highways leading out of the cities are well-lit and relatively crowded even at the asscrack of dawn. Namjoon gets shotgun—no one really trusts him with sitting in the open area at the back, he’ll probably fall off at some point—and so he’s relegated to the front.

Hoseok drapes a blanket over a sleeping Jimin, whose head lolls against Yoongi’s bony shoulder, and then pulls an arm across the both of them. It hasn’t been very long, but Taehyung’s already so used to this. A longer, larger Hoseok gathering a smaller Jimin and a grumpier Yoongi into his arms, and they fall into him like it’s the most natural thing to do.

If Taehyung doesn’t know better, he’d say that he’s even the slightest bit jealous. It would be nice, he thinks, to have someone fall into you,

or to fall into someone else. He's never been such a sap, but watching his closest friends look at each other with stars in their eyes makes him want—it makes him want something, anything.

So he turns to the side, and Jeongguk's there. He's not fast asleep like Jimin or Yoongi, but he's almost there. Jeongguk's head falls forward before he jerks it up again, shaking his head, eyes glazed over and lashes barely skimming the top of his cheekbones. His lips aren't a pretty pink or cherry red like the books have promised, barely any colour, chapped and pale with the night wind. And he hasn't quite left puberty behind either, skin not completely smooth, blemishes here and there. But it's still Jeongguk. Jeongguk, with his too-large eyes and non-existent top lip and boring, brown hair.

Taehyung reaches out and brushes Jeongguk's hair away from his forehead. He takes Jeongguk's chin and adjusts Jeongguk's head, places it on his shoulder gently. A pause. Then he gives in—it would be awkward if he sticks his elbows to his side and stiffens all the way through, he convinces himself—and wraps an arm around Jeongguk's waist. Pulls him in, like he's wanted to for a very long time.

Hoseok gives him a pointed look. He blushes and looks away, and then Jeongguk is breathing against his neck and shifting to bury his face further into Taehyung's shirt and Taehyung is scared.

Sokcho is nice. They stay at a small hostel that's got enough room for seven noisy, obnoxious boys (more like grown-ups, but who's counting?), and the owners tell them where to go for good barbeque and good hiking. Taehyung whines when Jimin brings up the idea of trekking up Seoraksan, only twenty minutes' bus ride away, and Namjoon's enthusiasm is quickly quelled when Yoongi shoves at him. ("You're going to trip over and fall and we'll have to deal with your broken, battered body.") The protests don't stop anyone, though, and they wake up at seven to catch the first bus to the national park.

"It's seven," Jeongguk groans. Even though he loves exercise, he's not a morning person in the least. "This is inhumane."

"Don't complain when you're not the one who has to drag Yoongi-

hyung's cold, dead body up a mountain," Jimin snaps.

There aren't many people. Seoraksan gets really crowded in the summer, the hostel owner had explained, but now's the perfect time: there are cherry blossoms, it's quiet enough, and the weather is nice. It takes them two hours and a lot of whining on Taehyung and Yoongi's parts before they finally get to the summit, the top of a large rock called Ulsanbawi.

Taehyung trudges up the last few steps, fighting through the lactic acid in his legs. As he's about to join the rest at the very top, he turns back, and sees Jeongguk resolutely looking forward, lips pursed, body tense.

"Jeonggukkie, you alright?"

"Yeah, I'm fine," Jeongguk grits out. He clambers up and onto the rock surface, away from the metal staircase. "I just have a thing about heights."

Taehyung frowns, holding on to the younger's forearm and bringing him toward the rest. The wind is really strong and it feels like he might fly away any moment. "You should've said something then."

"Nah, it's okay," Jeongguk reassures. "It's stupid. I know I'm not gonna fall, but I feel like I will anyway. It's worse going down."

"You do know that we have to go down, right?"

"Yeah, of course. As long as I don't accidentally slip and fall and die, I should be fine." Jeongguk smiles and sinks to the ground, leans his back against the rock surface. "I know I'm not going to fall or anything. But whenever I'm so high up I get this urge to jump. Just to see what's going to happen, you know? So my hands get all sweaty and I shake and it's scary."

Everyone else runs to the railings, taking in the vast expanse of Sokcho in front of them. Straight ahead is the quiet countryside, the occasional highway zigzagging across grassy fields. To the left is the rest of the national park, more mountains, more rocks and trees. And to the right—that's where Taehyung's gaze leads him, not just because Jeongguk's near there, but because it's the sea. It's the ocean, spreading far and wide and to god knows where and it's absolutely gorgeous. It's ever so slightly foggy, cloudy enough that cars in the distance get blurred out, and the horizon of the sea almost blurs into the sky.

But Jeongguk's not like the rest. He's not rushing off to take a selfie against the rickety bars that separate trekkers from certain death. He's in a corner, leaning against some rock surface, folding into himself. Wraps his arms around his body and pulls his hoodie in tight so that it doesn't fly away with the wind. Stretches out his legs and digs the heels of his feet into the ground, anchoring him there.

"Hey, it's alright," Taehyung says softly. The others are still busy trying to take photos, and they haven't noticed that Jeongguk and Taehyung aren't with them yet. He settles down beside the boy. "I'm here."

"I'm not *scared*." Jeongguk rolls his eyes. "Fine, maybe I'm a bit scared. But it's so stupid? I know it's a stupid fear but, oh god, I'm so high up and if I just do the tiniest thing... I could fling myself off the top right now and fall into nothing and it would be so easy to do so."

"But you won't, because that would be stupid," Taehyung points out.

Jeongguk opens his mouth to reply, but before he can, someone lets out a loud screech. They turn to look at the commotion; it was Seokjin, who's currently clutching at his hair like someone's done something very, very bad to it.

"I can't believe you lost your fuckin' cap," Yoongi cackles. Seokjin narrows his eyes and peers over the railing into nothingness. "That's Namjoon's job."

Namjoon looks much too offended for something so true. "Yah, hyung!"

"Just telling it like it is," Yoongi smirks.

Jeongguk was okay enough coming up, and probably why Taehyung barely noticed the boy's discomfort. To be fair, he was more preoccupied with trying not to die climbing up so many steps, and Jeongguk does tend to go quiet from time to time. But going down—that's another beast altogether. Jeongguk wasn't lying when he said it would be much worse.

"Jeongguk, are you okay?" Hoseok asks. He trails at the back with Taehyung and Namjoon, and he's the first to point out the fact that every step Jeongguk takes is way too calculated. "Do you need to stop and rest?"

"Nah, I'm good." Jeongguk doesn't turn around, but even Taehyung

can hear the grit in his voice. “I’ve got a heights thing. Need to make sure I don’t mess up any step.”

“Well, your thighs are certainly strong enough for that,” Taehyung says, trying to lighten up the mood. As much as he is comfortable around the rest, Taehyung knows that Jeongguk doesn’t like other people dwelling on his so-called ‘flaws’.

“You would know,” Jeongguk deadpans. And then blanches, in sync with Taehyung, at what he’s just implied, but no one else seems to take note.

“Okay,” Hoseok nods. “Just let us know whenever you feel tired.”

Taehyung leaves Jeongguk to his own devices, because he knows when the boy needs to be alone. But he keeps an eye out for Jeongguk anyway, and the moment they reach flatter ground, the boy relaxes visibly. Taehyung relaxes too.

Later, when most of them are half-drunk on cheap soju and very full on fried chicken, Jimin pulls Taehyung aside.

“How’s Jeongguk?”

“He’s alright,” Taehyung says. “Was just a heights thing, but even he knows it’s irrational.”

“No, not that.” Jimin sighs.

“Oh.”

“Yes, that.”

“...”

“Taehyung, are you guys together?”

Are they together, Taehyung wonders. What a good question to ask, one that has no answer whatsoever. And Taehyung doesn’t feel particularly inclined to seek one either, because he knows that whatever he ends up with, his heart will ache. His heart will ache and his stomach will sink and his body will break into pieces.

He thinks. He thinks back to Jeongguk, who stays with him through the night. Jeongguk, who’s snappy one moment but obnoxiously cute the next.

“I don’t know,” he says, and he really hopes those are not tears welling up. “We’re stepsiblings, fucking hell, what are we even doing? I’m already in too deep and I—fuck, I don’t know, the sex is great but I don’t just want sex.” It’s the first time he’s said it to himself, but the words don’t sound foreign at all. “Jeongguk’s mum doesn’t even know I’m bi. Dad’s going to disown me because he needs an upright, financially stable son. What the fuck am I doing?”

Jimin’s silent. Taehyung looks up and blinks away the tears, and he knows he looks a mess. Reaching forward, Jimin pulls him in, places his small hands on Taehyung’s shoulders.

“You’re okay,” Jimin says. Taehyung breathes into Jimin’s shoulder. “You’ll be okay. You can sort this out. You can talk to Jeongguk and sort something out.”

“It’s not that easy,” Taehyung says, voice muffled. “Jeongguk probably won’t even talk, and it’s not something that can be settled by talking. You *know* how my dad is. I love him, but he’s—he won’t stand for it.”

Jimin hesitates. “Have you told Jeongguk how you feel?”

“Of course not, do you think I’m stupid?” Taehyung scoffs. “He’d run away the moment he hears it. Fuck, *I* would run away the moment I hear it, but running away from yourself is something that only happens in novels.”

“I’m your best friend,” Jimin says. “I know what you’re like. I know this is unfamiliar to you and you don’t really know what to do, you’ve never felt this way before. But, Tae, you have to talk to him, even if you don’t know what’s going to come out of it.”

“That’s the problem!” Taehyung is frustrated. He pulls away from Jimin’s embrace, already missing the warmth. “*I don’t know*. I don’t like not knowing. Throw me any conflict or problem and I can face it, I’ll get it over and done with, but this—what the hell is this? I don’t know. I’m not even sure that I feel this way, because I’ve never felt it before. This is strange and unfamiliar and I’m fucking scared, Jimin. I’m scared, and I don’t know what to do.”

His voice cracks at the end, and he breaks.

But he takes Jimin's advice anyway, because Jimin is a shining ray of light who has a knack for knowing what people need, even if he doesn't always heed his own advice himself. The rest are out in the common area of the hostel, having met some travellers from Belgium, bonding over bottles of beer from the convenience store a street over.

Before Jeongguk can take the chance to leave and join them, Taehyung calls out, "Jeonggukkie, wait!"

"Yeah, hyung?" Jeongguk asks, leaning against the doorframe, arms crossed in front of his chest and looking for all intents and purposes like a model. "Don't you want to get the Stella before someone else finishes it?"

"I do," Taehyung agrees, "but this is more important. We need to talk."

Jeongguk frowns, brows pulled together. It's cute. "Okay."

"Sit down first," Taehyung says, sitting himself down on the edge of the bed. Jeongguk hesitates before following suit. "We need to talk."

"About?"

"About this," Taehyung says, gesturing to the space between them.

It's awkward. They haven't done anything physical at all the whole trip, not in front of their friends. The most sexual they've gotten was when Jeongguk climbed into Taehyung's bunk one night and whined about how he couldn't sleep, and they'd cuddle for the rest of the night.

"What about it?" Jeongguk asks, voice small.

"What are we doing?" Taehyung decides that cutting to the chase is better than prolonging the pain. He sighs and turns to face Jeongguk, and it's only then that he realises the younger boy has backed himself into the wall. "I—I like what we're doing, a lot. I like the sex and I like you, too, and—fuck, this is so hard—I'm not good with this whole feelings thing. And I like what we have. I don't know if you feel that way, but—"

"I do," Jeongguk says, eyes staring at a spot on the bed and voice so soft Taehyung barely catches it, if not for the way his face flushes red.

“I’m—I’m glad,” Taehyung says, and he finds that he can’t look at Jeongguk either, not without blushing. “But, Jeonggukkie, this arrangement, whatever it is, what are we going to do about it?” He sucks in a breath. “We’re stepsiblings, you know. Our parents are going to get married and we’ll be there to watch it happen, and then what?”

Jeongguk doesn’t reply. He doesn’t even move his gaze from that one spot on the bed. So Taehyung shifts closer, and to his surprise, Jeongguk doesn’t flinch.

“They’re going to find out, and then what? They’ll be so angry, Jeongguk. They’ll be so upset.”

“Have you ever,” Jeongguk begins, eyes finally coming up to meet Taehyung’s, and there’s a fierceness in them that Taehyung doesn’t expect, “done something for yourself, and not for other people?”

“What are you—”

“When you’re not around your parents—*our* parents—you’re different. You’re not the perfect son, because you don’t have to be. You smoke and drink and I bet your dad doesn’t know. You take Economics, but you don’t really like it. You want to become a financial consultant, but I know you like music more than crunching numbers for rich old men.” Jeongguk sits up straight now, and he’s so close, their foreheads almost touching. “Since when have you ever done anything because *you* wanted it, and not your dad?”

Taehyung doesn’t know how long he sits there, forehead pressed against Jeongguk’s, just letting the words sink in. Ribcage heaving up and down, breath heavy, something stuck in his throat that will not dislodge no matter what he does. Jeongguk is—Jeongguk is a fucking *brat*, that’s what he is, but he’s also right. He’s painfully, painfully right.

“Hyung.” Jeongguk puts his hands on Taehyung’s shoulders and leans in to kiss his cheek. It’s not romantic or sexual in the slightest, more comforting than anything else. “I won’t apologise for what I just said, because it’s true. But just think about it for a moment. Think about *yourself* for a moment.”

“Look,” Taehyung begins. He keeps his voice low and steady. “You don’t know what it’s like. You didn’t see the look on appa’s face when I told him I was bi. You didn’t see his face fall and break into a million fucking pieces when I told him I wanted to do music.

“You don’t get to tell me what to do, Jeongguk. Not when you haven’t had to do anything you didn’t want to.”

At this, Jeongguk freezes. Something akin to guilt flashes across his face, and he moves away from Taehyung. Not a jolt, not a sudden jerk, but a gradually leaning away.

“And don’t try to change the topic,” Taehyung breathes. He’s biting at his bottom lip now. He will do anything to keep the pain at bay. “What are we going to do about this?”

Jeongguk’s answer is immediate. “If we ignore it, it will go away.”

“You really think it’ll go away?” Taehyung’s laugh is full of mirth. “You really think they won’t find out?”

“I’m not saying they won’t find out,” Jeongguk explains, a million times more calm than Taehyung feels. “I’m saying we deal with it when the time comes.”

“And you know how much of a shitfest that will be?” Taehyung’s shaking now. His body is shaking, his voice is shaking. “Do you *know* how horrible that will turn out? Why face that, when we can do something about it now?”

“Because we *can’t* do anything about it now,” Jeongguk says. He turns away. “Look, I don’t want to talk about this. Why don’t we just get out of here and—”

“Fuck,” Taehyung hisses. He narrows his eyes and clenches his fists and he feels it, he feels his blood boiling. “Why can’t you just face the fucking problem, Jeongguk, why must you always push it aside and run away and—”

“Not everyone’s like you, Taehyung,” Jeongguk snaps, and the sharpness of his words strikes Taehyung like a whip. “It’s not always so easy.”

Jeongguk gets up after that, not a single word, opening the door and heading out to the common area to share beer with the rest of the gang, who have somehow managed to find even more travellers to talk with. Taehyung stays in the room for a while—he’s not sure how long, he just needs to catch his breath—and seethes.

He’s angry. He’s angry at so many things. He’s angry at Jeongguk, at himself, at the entire situation. He’s angry at the fact that he can’t

salvage the situation, that Jeongguk is right. Jeongguk is right in more ways than one, and even though it's something Taehyung knows in the back of his mind, to hear it vocalised by Jeongguk of all people cuts at him. It cuts and twists and pulls him to the ground. He's trapped now, and even though he has Jeongguk with him, he doesn't know how he's going to get out.

spring 2016, ii

The trip ends off on a tense note. Jeongguk is stubborn as a rock. He steadfastly refuses to do anything about their situation no matter how much Taehyung insists. Unsurprisingly, it drives an invisible but sharp wedge between them.

They still talk, but Jeongguk tries to squeeze himself next to Yoongi or Hoseok or Seokjin—anyone except Taehyung, basically. Jeongguk dashes away the moment he notices it's just him and Taehyung in any one place. Once, Taehyung catches Jeongguk smoking at the back of their hostel—Jeongguk's smoked before, but never alone, and he'd assumed that Jeongguk was a social smoker—but the moment they lock gazes, Jeongguk crushes the cigarette beneath his feet and runs off.

"Everyone got your bags?" Hoseok asks, as he hoists his own backpack higher up on his shoulders. "Okay, we're good to go."

The bus terminal is near. Only Yoongi, Seokjin, and Namjoon are heading back to Seoul; Jimin's going back to Busan and Hoseok to Gwangju.

"What about you?" Seokjin asks, raising his groomed brows at Taehyung. (Taehyung makes a mental note to ask Seokjin where he gets his eyebrows done.) Taehyung looks up from the ground, where he was trying to find his charger because those damn things are never where they're supposed to be. "Seoul?"

"Nah, I'm heading back to Daegu to see the family," Taehyung says.

"Oh yeah," Namjoon pipes up. "How's the wedding going?"

Oh fuck. He'd almost forgotten that his friends actually knew that his father was getting remarried, but they still have no idea that it's Jeongguk's mum who was marrying in. He must have made a face though, because next thing he knows, Jeongguk is looking at him pointedly, mouth pulled tight and brows knitted in the center.

"It's alright, I think." Taehyung tries to sound like he knows what he's doing. "Haven't been able to talk to appa much lately, he's been busy with planning."

"I'm going to Daegu too," Jeongguk cuts in, a bit louder than usual.

“Gonna go visit a family friend.”

It's awkward sitting next to each other. The bus is completely packed with locals taking advantage of the summer weather to travel, but everyone is taking the chance to fall asleep, and a stagnant sort of silence fills the air. Taehyung has the window, thank god, and he leans his head against the cool glass.

Sometimes he forgets how nice Korea actually is. The cities are nice enough with their towering skyscrapers and greying pavements, and the anonymity of blending in with ten, twenty million other people on an ordinary day is pleasant.

But there's a reason why he prefers taking the bus to Daegu instead of the train, he thinks, as he stares out the window. Sokcho is lovely—he's been here a few times before, with his mum and his dad, and then with just his dad—and the ocean is gorgeous. It stretches out for thousands of miles and he can't see the end of it, the water a slate grey that blends in with the pier. The vast plains and fields don't seem to ever end. It's peaceful.

It's not easy to forget that Jeongguk is right beside him. The boy sleeps, tired from five full days of hiking. Even asleep, Taehyung can't ignore him. He's pretty. His lashes are thin and sparse, but they're long, and they sweep across the top of his cheekbones when he scrunches his nose and sniffs. Lips small and pink and damp when his tongue darts out to sweep across the bottom lip. He's really pale too, Taehyung notices, and it makes his black hair stand out that much more. Jeongguk looks like a dream, the kind that you forget when you wake up, only flashes of blurry edges, like a dense morning fog, and a satisfying feeling of warmth left in its wake.

Taehyung kind of hates himself. He hates himself for getting involved, he hates himself for getting Jeongguk involved. If his problems were just him, then that would be fine. But now Jeongguk's dragged in. And maybe he can reassure himself, that it takes two hands to clap, but that's just pushing the blame away, isn't it?

He's the older one here. He's supposed to be—he's supposed to be more mature, more responsible. And even if it wasn't put down in words that he's supposed to take care of Jeongguk, he *wants* to take care of Jeongguk anyway.

Taehyung laughs half-heartedly. He's doing the exact opposite of that now, isn't he? Instead of taking care of Jeongguk, instead of making

his father happy, he's creating problems for everyone. It sucks, to know that you're a burden. Something warm and wet rolls down his cheeks and he wipes it away with the back of his hand, curling further in to the nook between the chair and the window.

Home is both different and the same. It's still home. It's still that one small house on the outskirts of downtown. His father's silver Hyundai is still parked outside and the same ahjumma greets him when he comes around the corner and they still have that small but quaint yard in front of the door. But now that yard is actually clean and kempt. The air-conditioning is actually working in the middle of the sweltering Daegu summer. There are more photos around the house, little trinkets on shelves that he never knew existed beneath the layers of dust.

"Oh, those were from when I travelled to China," Yein says, when she notices Taehyung peering at a dark wooden teapot. It looks like it came right out of a historical drama. "It looks old, but it's really not. Pretty, though."

Unlike Taehyung, Jeongguk tiptoes into the house like he's not sure whether he belongs. His mother gives him a Look, which he returns with a playful glare.

"She got it for five thousand won off a street vendor," Jeongguk whispers, after they're shooed off up to their rooms because Yein's preparing dinner. "I keep tellin' her it's cursed but she won't listen."

"Don't jinx your mum like that," Taehyung scolds.

"You mean *your* mum." Jeongguk begins to laugh but stops abruptly as soon as he realises what he's said.

On the bus ride back, they talked a bit. It was not as much as they did before the argument, but it's definitely more than right after, and Taehyung settled for that. There was still that undertone of playfulness lining their exchanges.

Taehyung didn't bring much back. He knows he will be back for a month at most before going back to Seoul, and truth be told, the apartment he shares with Jeongguk feels more like home than this

small terrace in Daegu already. He leaves traces of himself in that apartment: the first lighter he ever owned sitting on the shelf, the signed guitar pick that Jimin got him for his birthday stuck to the fridge with patterned tape, a single sock still hanging on the doorknob even though it's been a while since he had sex with anyone other than Jeongguk. Maybe Jeongguk leaves traces of himself there, too.

So there's not much to unpack at all, and he spends most of the rest of the evening fiddling with his phone. He'd go outside, but it's too hot and he's lazy and his legs are aching from the long bus ride. He should probably go talk to Jeongguk, but there's very loud music coming from across the hallway and Taehyung doesn't want to disturb him. *Maybe you're just scared*, a small voice in his head whispers. He smacks it away.

There's a knock on his door a few minutes later, and when he opens it, he expects that maybe it's Yein, telling him to come down for dinner. Or maybe his dad is back from work and wants to ask about school. He doesn't expect it to be Jeongguk, changed out of his jeans and into loose shorts, fingers playing with the hem of his hoodie.

"Hyung, can I talk to you?" Jeongguk asks. He bites his bottom lip and his eyes are wide and Taehyung caves.

"I thought you hated talking," Taehyung points out without any malice. "But okay. Go ahead."

"I need a favour." Jeongguk walks over and sits down on the edge of Taehyung's bed. Beside Taehyung, but a foot away. "Could you not tell my eomma about anything? Not about my one-night stands, not about me being gay, not about—not about us." He looks pensive for a moment. "She knows about the drinking and smoking, that's fine. But everything else... please don't say anything to her."

Taehyung frowns. It's like everything Jeongguk had said, everything he had thrown at Taehyung, was now gone with the wind, because he's a fucking hypocrite. But Jeongguk shrinks into himself, keeps his elbows at his side and knees to his chest. He keeps himself small, like he's scared.

"Weren't you the one going off on me for not thinking about myself?" Taehyung tries his best to sound calm amidst the anger. "What happened to that?"

"You really think this isn't for my own benefit?" Jeongguk looks at him incredulously, like the thought never crossed his mind. Then he

leans back, shoulders slumping, like he's just realised something. "You don't understand."

"Then make me," Taehyung insists. "Explain it. Help me understand."

Jeongguk's standing up now. His hands are curled into fists at his side, clenched so hard his knuckles are white. The vein on the side of his neck, the one Taehyung always liked to lick right before sucking a hickey into the skin, pulsates hard.

"You think it's so easy," Jeongguk snaps, "so easy to just talk. Good for you, isn't it?" His nostrils flare, his neck turns red. "Good that you don't have to worry about whatever happens after, or whatever happened before."

"Jeongguk," Taehyung begins tentatively. He reaches out a hand towards Jeongguk's forearm, but the boy rips it away. "Please."

Jeongguk's eyes are glistening. When he speaks, it sounds as if his throat is clogged up, like it's tightened so much that the words are almost impossible to get out.

"What do you do," Jeongguk sniffs, "when you can't let your mum know that you're gay, or that you sleep around, because your dad ran away with another guy?"

And then Jeongguk crumples. His knees give way and hit the ground, his hands fly up to cover his face. He looks infinitely small now, swallowed up by his sweater, folded into a ball and leaning against the leg of the bed frame. He buries his face into his knees, hands coming around to wrap around his shins, muffled sobs echoing in the air.

When Jeongguk falls, Taehyung falls with him. He crouches down and puts his hand to Jeongguk's head—softly, hesitantly—and when Jeongguk doesn't move away, he scoots closer, pulling Jeongguk's back into his chest. Jeongguk sits between his legs, now, and the way Jeongguk automatically curves back into Taehyung is familiar and warm. Taehyung's arms are long, and he brings them forward to pry Jeongguk's hands away from his head, from how he had been clutching his forehead so tight there are angry marks on his skin.

"Jeonggukkie," Taehyung murmurs. He takes Jeongguk's hands in his own and entangles their fingers. Leans forward and lets his head fall, tucking his chin into the dip of Jeongguk's shoulder. "It's okay. You're okay."

“No, it’s not,” Jeongguk replies. His voice is still tight and nasal, but multitudes calmer than before. “You said your dad was upset after you told him, but at least you could tell him anyway. Do you know what will happen if I tell eomma?”

“I don’t think she will hate you just because you’re gay,” Taehyung reasons. “She’s not homophobic, right?”

A pause. “Well, I don’t know,” Jeongguk admits. “I never dared to ask. But won’t it be similar—the son elopes with another man, the same way her husband did ten years ago?”

“She’s not that petty,” Taehyung says.

“She’s my mum, not yours.” Jeongguk’s voice is flat. “You don’t know her at all.”

The outburst earlier was unexpected, but the way Jeongguk sits comfortably in his arms now is even more so, in a good way. He’s almost docile, pliant. With each shift of Taehyung’s arms, Jeongguk will move to accommodate, in a way so fluid and natural it would be hard for anyone to believe that they haven’t done it before. If their parents walk in now—Taehyung would hate to see what happens.

Jeongguk falls silent, and Taehyung takes that as a cue to drop the topic. He’s not a dick. He’ll respect Jeongguk’s boundaries, because those things are private anyway. Taehyung’s not about to interfere in Jeongguk’s relationship with his mum.

Sitting like this, though, it makes it easy to forget that they’ve got a problem on their hands. Taehyung traces shapes and spiders on Jeongguk’s bony knee, and Jeongguk turns his head to the side and presses his lips to Taehyung’s bare arm. They wrap around each other like an old blanket, comfortable in the familiarity. The floor may be hard and the air may be stifling, but at least they have each other.

Taehyung has missed this. The past week with their friends meant that his interaction with Jeongguk was kept to a minimum, barely bordering on suggestive at all. Add their argument to that and it’s

plain to see why he's been touch-starved. Jeongguk-starved, more like.

"Quiet," Taehyung hisses, digging a leg between Jeongguk's thighs and pressing him into the bed. He tightens his fingers around Jeongguk's wrists. "The walls are thin."

"They're not thin," Jeongguk scoffs. "I knew you were jerking off in here last time not because I could hear it, but because I could *smell* it."

There's that sass again. Taehyung smirks, and then brushes his knee up against the bulge in Jeongguk's boxers, feeling his cock twitch when a gasp falls out of Jeongguk's mouth. Jeongguk narrows his eyes and then turns them over—he's always been stronger anyway, Taehyung knew that he could have flipped their positions whenever he wanted—and now Taehyung's the one being held down, his back digging into the soft mattress, heels finding purchase at the end of the bed.

"Baby, are you trying to top?" Taehyung coos. He tilts his hips upward, but the grind turns into a barely-there brush when Jeongguk holds Taehyung's thighs down with his own.

He pulls himself upward the same moment Jeongguk leans down. He expects a fight—a tangle of tongues, a battle for power—but the kiss is slow. It's slow and long and drawn-out, and he freezes, taken aback, before matching Jeongguk's languid pace with his own. Jeongguk's mouth is sweet and earthy, like the pat bingsu they'd had for dessert, familiar and warm and wet. Taehyung runs his tongue along the top of Jeongguk's mouth and brushes his thumb over a nipple, and Jeongguk lets a whimper escape.

"I think I've said this before," Taehyung breathes, shifting back to put his weight on his forearms, eyes blown wide, "but you're so sensitive."

He's never seen anything more beautiful. The view from above is just as good as the one from below: Jeongguk's eyes half-lidded and pupils dilated, small mouth slightly open. His arms cage Taehyung in, muscles straining with the effort of holding himself up. His shirt is too big as usual, and the collar hangs open, giving Taehyung a perfect view of his pectorals.

Taehyung tugs at the collar of Jeongguk's shirt, pulling it up and over Jeongguk. Half-naked now, Jeongguk's strain is more obvious. Stomach sucked in and clenched tight, the ridges of his abdominals visible even in the dim light, his chest heaving up and down in

tandem with heavy breaths.

It's hot. Everything is so hot, the heat curling around him is stifling in the best way possible, Jeongguk's body warmth melding in with the summer heat. Kissing Jeongguk, he thinks, as he tugs at the hair at the back of Jeongguk's neck and bites Jeongguk's bottom lip between his teeth, is lazy and easy and natural, like falling back into a morning routine that he didn't ever know he missed. He wraps a leg around Jeongguk's hip, hooking behind to press the heel of his foot into Jeongguk's unfairly round ass, smiling into the kiss when Jeongguk groans.

He could get used to this, he thinks. He's burning in the best way possible. The fact that Jeongguk makes him happy both in and out of bed is just a very big, very important bonus. They kiss slowly, like they have all the time in the world.

"Come on, off," Jeongguk whines, pulling at the hem of Taehyung's shirt.

They're both naked within the next ten minutes, save for a minute or two in which Taehyung can't figure out the intricacies of Jeongguk's zipper and gets a bark of laughter in response. This is perfect, really. After so long of going without Jeongguk, of reducing kisses to subtle glances and giant, warm cuddles to miniscule touches beneath the table of a diner, this—Jeongguk bare and beautiful above him, clinging to the bed sheets like his life depends on it, keening every time Taehyung so much as touches him—is a sight to behold.

Taehyung flips them over again. Jeongguk doesn't fight it, he lets Taehyung do as he pleases, and he falls back onto the bed with a soft thud. There's a thin strip of air running down from his belly button, barely there at all, and Taehyung licks at it. Then he licks Jeongguk's cock, mouth only slightly encasing the tip, tongue swirling to gather the salty taste of pre-come.

Jeongguk's breathing heavy now, light gasps accompanying each exhale. His hands go to Taehyung's hair and he pulls, hard, and Taehyung lets out a deep moan that vibrates around Jeongguk. He wraps his fingers around his own cock, stroking slow and smooth, painfully hard.

"Ah, slow down," Jeongguk breathes out. "Otherwise I'm gonna come."

"Then you can always come again," Taehyung says, moving backward

to grin mischievously at Jeongguk.

Jeongguk pulls especially hard on Taehyung's hair, tugging his head backward so that he's forced to look up at Jeongguk. A moan rips out of Taehyung's throat before he can help it. This is different, Jeongguk's usually not so dominant; it's different, and it's really fucking hot, having Jeongguk look down at him with dark, hooded eyes and a cherry mouth, baring Taehyung's neck to him, smooth and golden skin up on offer.

"You like that, don't you?" Jeongguk smirks. It's funny how the teasing tug of his mouth doesn't look out of place on such a cute face.

Jeongguk digs one leg between Taehyung's thighs and tangles their lower limbs together. It's impossible to resist, or to even try, so Taehyung merely gives in and helplessly ruts against Jeongguk's strong thigh, looking for some sort of friction. Their cocks are touching and he's so sensitive, he doesn't care anymore, he just *wants*, but Jeongguk isn't giving him any of it. He whines, and all Jeongguk does is grin beautifully, not moving away from Taehyung's desperate attempts at friction, but not meeting each thrust either.

"Look who's the needy one now." Jeongguk sounds way too satisfied with himself. Maybe later, once they're no longer doped up on endorphins and the high of sex, Taehyung will give his head a good hard smack.

Taehyung's about to retort back, but Jeongguk hooks their legs together and lifts both of them off the bed. Taehyung yelps, eyes widening in surprise, cock painfully erect against the hard plane of Jeongguk's stomach. Instinctively, he wraps his legs around Jeongguk's lower waist tightly and his fingers press into Jeongguk's neck. He knows Jeongguk won't let him fall, but he thinks he might drop from how turned on it is, it's embarrassing. It's fucking *hot*, the way Jeongguk carries him like he's nothing.

Then there's a wall pressing against his back, cold and hard against overheated skin, slick with sweat. He's being held against the wall with nothing more than Jeongguk's sheer strength and it makes his head spin. Again, he ruts uselessly against Jeongguk, but it only gives a temporary, unsatisfying roughness, and he feels Jeongguk smirk against his neck when he whines.

"Hyung, you gotta be quiet," Jeongguk mocks. He bites down harshly on Taehyung's neck and Taehyung keens. Dominant Jeongguk is sexy,

fuck. “Didn’t you say the walls were really thin?”

“You little shit,” Taehyung hisses. He almost can’t get the words out with how needy he is. “Just fuck me already.”

“Manners, Tae.” Hands reach around Taehyung’s thin thighs, a stark contrast next to Jeongguk’s thick, muscled ones, and pry them away from Jeongguk’s hips. Taehyung laments the loss of heat and contact, and he’s about to protest, when Jeongguk says, “Face the wall.”

“What?”

“Face the wall, Taehyung,” Jeongguk repeats. “Face against the wall, if you want it. I know you’re a kinky shit.”

Taehyung doesn’t deign to reply because he knows that anything he says will just feed Jeongguk’s too-large ego. The first time Jeongguk takes charge, Taehyung likes it more than he expects, and Jeongguk is even bigger of a snarky douche than he usually is. So he simply turns around and faces the wall, the upper half of his naked front tentatively pressing against the wall. He does it slowly, because he wants to draw this out as long as possible, and because the wall is really kind of cold and he’s covered in sweat, but then Jeongguk pulls his hair and twists his head—not too rough, but fast and urgent—so that his right cheek is plastered against the wall.

He feels Jeongguk’s chest up against his back, damp, hot skin sliding together in the most obscene way possible. Jeongguk’s face is barely visible from the corner of his eye, cheeks flushed and pupils dilated, lips wet and delicious. He cages Taehyung in with his arms on the wall, braced on either side of Taehyung’s face, and puts his entire body up against Taehyung’s, cock rubbing teasingly at Taehyung’s entrance.

“Fucking hell, Jeongguk,” Taehyung spits. He’s bordering on pissed off at this point. “You’re such a tease.”

“Payback for all those times you tied me to the bedpost and left me with blue balls for half an hour.” Taehyung can hear the grin in his voice even if he can’t see it.

Jeongguk takes Taehyung’s earlobe between his teeth, bites down the slightest bit, on the right side of just too hard. He runs his hands up the side of Taehyung’s thighs, along his slim waist, soft stomach, across the flat plane of his chest which looks admittedly unimpressive next to Jeongguk’s toned pectorals. Then he slides a hand up

Taehyung's clavicle, dipping into his collarbone, and then rubs his thumb against Taehyung's bottom lip.

"Suck," Jeongguk orders, as if Taehyung wouldn't have done it already. So he takes Jeongguk's thumb between his lips and sucks, hard, delighting in the fact that Jeongguk's cock twitches as he does so. "You're so gorgeous. I don't know how I got so lucky."

He must be lying, Taehyung thinks. How could anyone who likes a fucked up guy like Taehyung ever be considered lucky?

When Jeongguk leaves kisses along Taehyung's spine, Taehyung's mind goes a blur and he can't think of anything else. Jeongguk disappears for a few seconds, leaving Taehyung with the cold surrounding air, and returns with a bottle of lube, coating the liquid around his fingers before pushing one into Taehyung. Taehyung sighs, eyes closing in bliss, but it's nowhere near full enough. Fingers may be nice, but they're not anything like what he actually needs.

"Why are you going so slow?" Taehyung grits out, nipping at Jeongguk's thumb and smiling when he jerks it away with a small yelp. "Fuck me like you mean it."

Two more fingers later and Taehyung is stretched and loose, face pleasantly sore from being pressed up against the wall, wrists pinned above his head so that he can't do anything except squirm against Jeongguk's fingers. He's getting antsy now. Jeongguk has three fingers in him but he's still a teasing little shit, withdrawing his fingers every time he brushes against Taehyung's prostate.

"Hurry up," Taehyung whines, and it's been a while since he's wanted anything this much. Since he's wanted anyone this much.

Jeongguk obliges, pressing the tip of his cock against Taehyung's hole. What a mess they must look, flushed and sweaty, naked bodies sliding over each other. He teases, and Taehyung keens. Taehyung is so sensitive, he can feel Jeongguk right there, but the asshole isn't pushing in, instead choosing to circle the rim with his cock.

Taehyung tries his best to move, maybe get his wrists out and push Jeongguk to the bed to ride him silly, but Jeongguk is stronger, more solid. He laughs when Taehyung tries to rip his arms away but freezes when Taehyung pushes his ass back against Jeongguk, the other hand stilling on Taehyung's hipbone.

When he finally slides in, the fullness is infinitely satisfying. Taehyung

has missed this. Jeongguk groans when Taehyung starts the rhythm, then matches Taehyung thrust for thrust. It takes a while, but after Jeongguk shifts Taehyung slightly, he finds Taehyung's prostate, and each languid meeting of their hips makes Taehyung seize up and his mind goes blank and all he can focus on is trying not to fall apart in Jeongguk's arms, like he hasn't already done so a long time ago.

Jeongguk comes first, spilling into Taehyung, and Taehyung thanks his past self for the thousandth time for making sure they're both clean so that they can do away with condoms. There's nothing like the slide of bare skin on bare skin, the slight roughness and harshness. The feeling when someone comes inside you and leaves your thighs dripping with white, sticky liquid. Or when you see someone else with come carving a trail down their inner thighs, a finger dipping in to spread it around their stomachs filthily.

And he pulls out, taking a few moments to breathe while Taehyung breathes heavily and mutters a string of curses. Then there's something else going inside Taehyung, colder but lubed up, the familiar sensation of rubber.

"A dildo?" Taehyung asks, incredulous even as he is turned on. "Since when did you have that?"

"A vibrator," Jeongguk corrects.

The vibrator is pretty big, longer than Jeongguk but not as thick, and it fills him up, but not in the same way. A little too mechanical, too robotic, but Taehyung forgets that the moment Jeongguk turns the vibrator on to the lowest setting, and his knees give way. They buckle, and Jeongguk's arms fly to his waist just in time to pull him upright.

His cock is red and erect. It curves up into his stomach and it *hurts*, he's been so hard for so long and he just wants to fucking come, damn it. The vibrator sends waves of pleasure all the way to his fingertips and he's so close he thinks he is going to cry and then Jeongguk turns it on to the highest setting, and he tweaks a nipple and he bites Taehyung's earlobe and Taehyung comes, hard and fast, eyes rolling back into his head, every part of his body that is touching Jeongguk suddenly hyperaware.

They clean each other up in the shower later, with a blowjob and a handjob on the side. It's kind of incredible how their parents haven't caught on in the slightest, mistaking their comfort around each other for brotherly friendliness instead of something else.

This time, Taehyung is the big spoon. He drowns in a sweater that belongs to Jeongguk, the Yonsei University varsity jacket that the younger boy doesn't wash nearly enough considering the frequency with which he wears it. He wraps his arms around Jeongguk's waist, pulling him in, and they fit like lock and key. Like salt and pepper. Like Jeongguk and Taehyung.

Jeongguk whispers something along the lines of "good night", maybe in a few more words, maybe in less. He lets out a small, adorable yawn before his eyelids flutter shut. Something settles deep into Taehyung's bones, and he doesn't want to know what it is.

Some people say the universe ends not with a bang but with a whimper. Jeongguk is Taehyung's universe, and they end together with a bang so loud and so frightening it makes Taehyung shake. They end something like this:

Jeongguk is everything. Jeongguk is all around him, hands roaming and mouth wet and hot and open. He falls apart beneath Taehyung's hands and draws constellations on Taehyung's skin with stars at his fingertips. They've fallen into this as of late, slow and lazy kisses instead of hot and fast ones. It's as if not being caught in their own home has given them license that whatever they're doing is okay. That they have all the time in the world.

But the most precious things in the world are also the most fragile. So they break easily, shattering into pieces at your feet, drawing blood when the sharp edges dig into veins.

It starts with a mother's choked gasp and a father's first curse.

"What's going on?" Yein asks, voice small. Smaller than Taehyung has ever heard it. He's always thought of her as an iron woman, for all of the three times they've met. Never thought that she would be capable of words as meek and timid as these.

Taehyung doesn't dare to look. The only thing he watches for is his father's face, carefully blank, the kind lines of his face smoothened out in a state of numbness. The change is sudden: everything crumples,

his nose screws up, his brows fall in together, his mouth turns down. He takes a step back, as if already anticipating the hand his son stretches out. He steps back, like Taehyung is disgusting.

“Taehyung,” his dad begins, “what’s the meaning of this?”

Jeongguk turns from his mother to Taehyung’s father, eyes glistening, “I can explain—”

“All this time,” Taehyung’s dad breathes, “you guys were fooling around behind our backs.”

“No, we weren’t—”

“How long?” Yein interrupts. Her voice is still as small as it was, but calmer now.

“Around August,” Taehyung says, because he doesn’t want Jeongguk to reply, not in his state. Not when he’s a few poorly-worded sentences away from completely breaking apart. He’s surprised at how steady he sounds.

But then his father whispers, almost inaudible, “What happened to my son?”, and he breaks apart. His chest is tight and his heart is in his throat, he can’t breathe, he’s rooted to the spot and he wants to reach out but he can’t. A wave of shame crashes over him as he looks at how his father’s face darkens over and falls, that he’s let his father down. That he’s let everyone down. That he’s ruined what this family is, what this family could have been.

“Appa,” Taehyung croaks, voice splintering with each syllable. His cheeks are wet and everything has blurry edges now.

He’s about to reach out, when Yein gasps, “You’re just like your father, you’re breaking the family apart,” and Taehyung doesn’t need to see to know that Jeongguk is breaking, too. That the hard, painful thud is Jeongguk falling to the bed and burying his face in his hands and replacing constellations with tear tracks. That the quiet, pitiful sniffs will soon be accompanied by full-out sobs.

Taehyung doesn’t know where to look. This is one family—sort of, not really—but actually two, and suddenly they’ve fractured into a million pieces. It’s all his fault, isn’t it? It’s all his fault for being irresponsible, for not being his father’s son. For running away and being his own person for the better part of the year.

It would be better if his father was screaming. If he was scolding Taehyung, yelling at the top of his lungs. If his tears were angry. But he's—he's looking at Taehyung with a sort of sadness, ten different shades of disappointment, a sort of quiet resignation clouding over his gaze, like he thinks that Taehyung has fucked up and can't be saved no matter what. His eyes are small and soft behind his glasses and he pulls his lips taut in the same way Taehyung does whenever he encounters something he doesn't know how to solve.

It's a look Taehyung knows intimately well. It's the one that says "I know what's best for you", and Taehyung doesn't know how to feel about it. He's conflicted. He wants to do his father proud, but he's his own person, and so is Jeongguk, and he wants to be his own person *with* Jeongguk, and it's tearing him apart.

"I want you two out of the house." Taehyung doesn't want to know who says it, because it will probably hurt whichever way. "Don't come back, not until you sort yourselves out."

Everything that happens next is as much of a blur as what happened before. There's no kicking and screaming, only a dread hovering above their heads, as quiet and deadly as it is loud and echoing in their ears. Taehyung doesn't look at Jeongguk, he doesn't dare, but packing is quick and they're done before long.

Finally, when they're a few steps away from the front door, out in the open, Taehyung takes Jeongguk's chin between his fingers.

Everything hurts, and everything is confusing. Taehyung doesn't know what to do. For once, facing the problem head on won't help, not when he wants to keep everything he loves close to his heart and encased in his palm. Not when he wants to hold Jeongguk tight against his chest, to wake up every morning to the sun glinting off the slope of Jeongguk's nose, to have Jeongguk's laughter tinkling in his ears before he falls asleep.

"We'll go back to Seoul first." Taehyung kisses the tears away and tastes salt and confusion on his tongue. "Back home."

Jeongguk gives him a pained smile that he doesn't know what to make of. They leave together and it almost feels like they can leave the problem behind, but the ache in his chest and the three-foot gap between their bodies will not let them forget, not one bit.

interlude

In his whole twenty-two years of being, Taehyung has never once flirted with the thought that he might be able to take on the world. He never for a single second believed that a person as small as he do anything about anything bigger than himself. But the past few months have changed things. When Jeongguk dips down and presses kisses to his brow bone, night fading into dawn, or when Jeongguk laughs so hard his eyes crinkle, or when Jeongguk folds himself into Taehyung's side—

—Taehyung, in those fleeting moments, believed that he could take on the world. He could take on the universe, as long as Jeongguk was by his side. He etched those memories into his palm and kept them there.

And, now, he has his heart in his palm too—or maybe it's in his throat, since he can barely get the words out—and there's nothing he can do.

"We need to end this," Taehyung says. As always, it is Taehyung saying, Taehyung making the decisions.

His voice is small, not because he doesn't dare to make it any louder, but because he simply cannot. The summer breeze almost carries his words away with it, like they know how much he hates them. The silent waters of the river barely lap at the bank. A cyclist passes by, leaving in his wake a light dusting of soil that Taehyung can't be bothered to care about, not when there are more important things at hand.

Like the relationship that's so fragile, a porcelain bowl that is riddled with cracks and yet so well-loved neither owner can bare to let it go. Or the space hanging between them, as quiet and tense as it is familiar and warm. Or Jeongguk, maybe. Jeongguk is important.

But, he knows: head over heart, mind over matter.

What is the most practical course of action isn't always the most desirable, even if this truth hurts so much his entire being shakes with the weight of it.

"Tae," Jeongguk begins, voice cracking.

"You saw what happened." Palms curling into fists, a simmering anger

in his stomach. It's not as... chaotic as he expected. He's surprisingly calm. "We can't continue this. It's bigger than us."

"I can't believe, up till now, you're still worried about what other people think of you." Jeongguk chuckles. A sad one, breathy at the end.

The ends of Jeongguk's mouth curl up into the night and dissipate almost immediately, the same way all the air escapes from Taehyung. If it wasn't so somber, it would be funny. How Taehyung doesn't dare to take a single step nearer when all they'd done the past few weeks was fall into each other slowly, languidly, like they had all the time in the world. How Taehyung doesn't dare to even move, because the slightest flinch would probably send him crumpling into a mess on the ground.

Taehyung hates it, but he knows it's for the best. He has to leave carefree weekends behind soon, but Jeongguk still has two more years to go. Two more years of relying on their parents, because the last thing either of them need to do is break a marriage apart.

It feels like a stalemate. He knows what's the best option, but—there's always a but, isn't there?—a small part of him wishes that Jeongguk would say no. That Jeongguk will fight for him, that Jeongguk will fight for *them*, as hard as he fought every single time Taehyung tried to get him to give in.

He wants to laugh. It's funny, how he wants so hard for Jeongguk to fight, but he's too much of a coward to do it himself.

"Alright then, if that's what you want," Jeongguk breathes. His head is bowed down but he looks up at and toward Taehyung, ribcage heaving with each breath. His eyes are the same as always, wide and bright and shining in the dark. Mouth a cupid's bow that Taehyung can remember with his eyes closed. "If that's what you want."

Maybe this is what love is. The realisation hits Taehyung: that this is what love is, that maybe he's in love. Maybe love is hurried, rushed nights in the dark with nothing but breaths and want between two bodies; waking up right when dawn breaks, just in time to catch the rising sun caress your lover's eyelids; loving so hard, loving with your entire body, until you have nothing left to give—

—and at the end, you are so spent, you have given everything, that when the world turns against you, you can no longer fight.

Back in Seoul, it's almost as if they can leave all their problems behind, but not quite. Their touches are non-existent now, and Taehyung and Jeongguk keep an uncomfortable distance from each other. Sometimes, when they're elbowing their ways through crowded streets or squeezed onto a corner of the peak-hour train, Taehyung gets an urge to reach out. The urge is so strong and so violent he has to physically grab his own wrist to stop himself, fingernails digging into soft skin.

He doesn't reach out, in the end. Not once, not ever. Not even when it gets so bad he has to turn away and blink the tears away, because this is the only way he won't fall apart.

One last year. Make it through the rest of break, and then the school year, and he's done. He's free.

When he is with his friends, it's almost like nothing ever happened at all. They know about Jeongguk and they know about Taehyung, but they don't know about Jeongguk and Taehyung. But this time, when the two of them walk into Hoseok's place with the last of the summer rain staining on their clothes, the entire atmosphere sobers up.

The laughter stops for more than a moment, and it takes everything in Taehyung to drag himself into the living area. Jeongguk shuffles in behind him, water droplets escaping from his hair when he shakes his head to dry off.

"Something's wrong, isn't there," Seokjin says, solemn.

Jimin, ever the angel, is the first to get up, untangling himself from Yoongi's arms. "Are you guys okay? Where'd you come from? You're drenched."

"Our parents' place," Jeongguk says, and that's when Taehyung realises he's not mistaking the look of confusion and dawning pity on everyone's faces.

So they tell. That they're stepsiblings, that their parents are getting married some time within the next year and they haven't really told anyone, except Jimin. And everyone listens with rapt attention, serious for once, the lively atmosphere of before greying with each

moment. He's thankful, though, that everyone listens. That everyone is there.

"We thought you guys were together," Namjoon says. He seems hesitant, eyes wavering, as if he wasn't sure if that was the right thing to say. "You seemed like it."

Everyone is quiet, but the words ring in the air. Neither Taehyung nor Jeongguk have to speak for the answer to be heard.

Later, when they have left and retreated to their apartment, Taehyung quietly messages the landlord to cancel their lease for the upcoming year. They will find a dorm, and they will no longer see each other as often. It's for the best—at least, that's what Taehyung keeps telling himself.

The rooftop is quiet. It is their place. Above the lines of the city and away from everyone else, just them and the velvet night and cigarette smoke chasing from chapped lips.

"Hyung," Jeongguk whispers. It's the first time he's looked at Taehyung in days. Weeks, even. "I'll miss you."

Taehyung doesn't even need to open his mouth for Jeongguk to catch his answer between his fingers.

He wants to reach out. It's always back to this, isn't it? The wanting. The need to lean forward and clasp Jeongguk's hands between his own, knowing that they've started from a stubborn hostility that surged into want, and then fondness, and then everything comes collapsing down like a house of cards. The foundations were fragile to begin with, edges glued together with nothing but borrowed time.

Sometimes he wonders why they even started, knowing that it could only have ended the way it did. Not with a bang but a whimper, low and drawn-out, its shadow hovering over them.

It hurts, knowing that Jeongguk is right there. Yet they have already ended, and he can no longer reach out without a guilt stabbing at his chest.

It hurts, that he can't afford that. That he can't reach out. Jeongguk is right there and he is beautiful, he looks at Taehyung like Taehyung holds the universe in his hands, but it's Jeongguk who is Taehyung's universe. His eyelashes the constellations in the sky, his breathing the heartbeat of galaxies. A childlike wonder juxtaposed by a fierce spirit that only Jeongguk is capable of wielding.

He once thought that he could take on the world with Jeongguk by his side. If anything, he thought they would have each other. But he's a coward, and he knows it's for the best. And he's given so much and so has Jeongguk, and whatever courage he'd had the first time he admitted to himself that he might just love Jeongguk—that he just might be in love with Jeongguk—has waned. No one takes kindly to two boys, joined by contract but not by blood, together.

It's strange that he isn't crying. There's something stuck in his throat and his chest tightens so hard he wishes his ribcage would just shatter, but there isn't a single tear. Head over heart, mind over matter.

Maybe this is the universe's way of telling him that he has to let go. That sometimes, you don't always get what you want. That you don't always get what you need.

Taehyung stares out into the city again, because if he looks at Jeongguk any longer, he will crumble.

"When we move out, I will miss you." He looks down at his palms and remembers all the times Jeongguk traced those lines—head, heart, life—carving hot trails and sweet whispers with his lips. "I already do."

“Every time we video call I just feel worse,” Jimin whines. The screen freezes for a second before the feed picks back up again. “Gross, we jpeg’d again, didn’t we?”

“Mhm,” Taehyung replies. “Connection’s a bit bad here.”

“No shit, you’re in the Taiwan countryside.” Jimin rolls his eyes, and the whine rears its head again, a little ugly, a little funny. “You’re having fun out there travelling and I’m stuck in some office. The only saving grace is my monthly paycheck.”

“See, at least you’ve got a paycheck,” Taehyung points out. A lock of hair flies into his eyes and he’s briefly reminded of the fact that yes, he should really get a haircut soon.

It’s been four, five years since Taehyung graduated, and things have all been a bit of a whirlwind, to be honest. An internship straight out of university and a short stint at one of the largest finance firms later, Taehyung soon realised: this was not for him. The life of staying in the office till midnight, only to rush home and arrive again before the clock strikes nine: this was not for him.

And so he took the advice of someone he once loved—and maybe he still loves him, he doesn’t know himself any longer—and left. Took the first plane out of Incheon and hightailed it out of Korea.

It was hard at first, but he had savings, and he’d bought a guitar and busked on the streets; and though what he thought of as home kept changing, never stagnant, it was good enough for him. At least this way, he gets to see more of the world. Do what he never let himself.

“Have you spoken with your dad lately?” Jimin asks. Voice quieter now, smaller, tucking itself away. “He called me a few days ago, asked if I’d heard from you.”

“It’s been two months,” Taehyung replies.

The first few months after he’d packed up and left, his dad called every day. Occasionally, there’d be an unknown number too, but it always comes a few hours after his dad’s, and he has an inkling of who it is but was never really keen on finding out.

But, gradually, even his dad stopped trying, too. Calls became sparse, maybe once every couple of weeks. He wasn't keeping track.

"How are the others?" Taehyung asks.

"They're doing good," Jimin replies, and the sound of rustling passes through the phone, a telltale sign that Jimin's adjusting himself on the bed again. He's always been fidgety, needs the most comfortable position to talk. "Seokjin-hyung just got promoted, so he's treating us to barbeque this weekend."

He'd packed up and left Seoul, but a part of him remained behind. A part that latched itself onto his friends; onto Jimin, onto his hyungs, onto the small road he detoured through every morning while rushing to class. A part that close to his heart, a thread of longing ripped from his chest that refused to go where the rest of him went.

Travelling is great, he loves it. He went to Japan first, in the thick of summer when the heat of Tokyo drowned him with its warmth. Then China, through the cities once again, until the anonymity was enough and he retreated to the countryside.

And it's all a blur from there: Malaysia, Vietnam, Thailand, Singapore, until he decided to splurge and flew to London. And that was the first time it hit. The pang of longing, like something wasn't quite right. He travelled all over the world, but somehow his heart wasn't—it wasn't quite there with him, not in the moment. He loved seeing new places and meeting new people, but every night, when he sunk back into the thin mattresses of his hundredth hostel, the bed always felt too empty. The rooms were too noisy with voices he didn't know.

And so, he travelled. He travelled a lot. He kept trying to ignore it but every night he would always end up back where he started. Back home, in Seoul. At that apartment building they shared for a mere year. So short and fleeting, nothing but a blip in his entire existence, but a forever he shared once upon a time just the same.

Sometimes, he thinks back. He wishes he was back. Wishes they could turn back time and everything would be alright. Maybe then he wouldn't have fallen in love with someone who showed him that the world is his for the taking, someone who walked through life with eyes so bright he'd never be able to compare. Someone he couldn't have.

"I'm coming back," Taehyung says. He'd been back a couple of times over the last few years, but he always treaded carefully and made sure

to avoid Mapo-gu. “I don’t know for how long.”

“Good.” Jimin sounds calm, but there’s a hint of a smile in his voice. “You’re free to bum on our couch.”

Maybe this time his heart will finally settle, he thinks. It’s been too long.

A week turns into two, and then three, and Taehyung has more or less lost count. He ends up bumming in Jimin, Hoseok, and Yoongi’s shared apartment in Nonhyeon-dong—between the three of them, they make more than enough to get by—but he is often sexiled. On those nights, he’d take to walking along the streets: the houses are big and nice, and the architecture a charming sort of ugly, like no one ever cared to think about how their house looked next to everybody else’s, yet it still worked out somehow.

It is hard to sleep anyway, because nowadays it seems like his body is in the right place but his heart still isn’t satisfied. So he takes to walking, and it calms him.

There is a park nearby. A small one that presents itself under the guise of a fitness corner, but if you venture a little behind that pagoda to the side, there’s a trail that leads in and out of the slight hill it sits on, passing through a badminton court. When he’s lucky people will be walking their dogs, and he would go out of his way to let the tiny shiba nip at his boots.

He’s in the shelter this time, a kimbap in one hand and soju in another. Dinner comes at eleven, right before the clock strikes midnight, but he’s not in the position to be picky.

It’s just—sometimes, it hurts. His heart still aches even after all these years. He thinks emptiness, numbness, would be better, but he’s not lucky enough for that. The kimbap tastes like regret on his tongue, like something that could have been but never was. And the alcohol, it burns, but it’s not enough to distract from this listlessness.

Three months in, and he finds a new job. It's a simple one. He does finances for Yoongi and Namjoon's music production company, and sometimes doubles up as receptionist. The office is down the road from where he now lives, just behind the convenience store that he passes by every day when going to the park. Big Hit is small and new, but cosy, and when he watches trainees filter in and out, he can almost pretend that he managed to chase his dreams of doing music for a living.

"You look like your dog just died," Namjoon says, passing him a warm cup of latte. It's winter and Seoul is harsh, as usual. The cold isn't so bad but the wind is biting. "Rough night?"

"Yeah," Taehyung replies. He'd gone out to the park again, and it was freezing. He'd held the cigarette and smoked till his fingertips turned red and numb. "Couldn't sleep, and it was chilly outside."

"Hobi tells me about your nighttime walks." Namjoon frowns and leans against the door. "You should see a doctor. Sleep's important."

"I'm doing okay," Taehyung dismisses. He takes a sip of his latte. It's too sweet. "Don't worry about me, you've got a company to run. Tracks to produce. A rookie group to look after."

Namjoon frowns. It's only been a few years, but the stress of helming a company in an industry as saturated and competitive as this one has taken its toll, and it shows. His forehead creases where it never did before and his mouth is pulled tight more often, but his eyes are still soft, and if anything, Taehyung is thankful that he still has his hyung. Namjoon smiles before he leaves, a small but reassuring one.

"Tae-hyung!" Jaehyun calls out. He's one of the trainees, a bumbling fourteen-year old who moved to Seoul not much earlier than Taehyung returned. At least he seems to be settling in better. "Do you want anything? We're going down to the kimbab shop."

"It's alright, I've got coffee." He holds up his latte like a trophy. "I can live off caffeine."

"And nicotine?" Hyungwon snickers. Another trainee, this one breaching seventeen, but they all know about his habit. "You've got such a nice voice, hyung. Won't smoking ruin it?"

"I like to think my natural rasp is my charm," Taehyung replies. "Now

go off and have lunch, stop bothering your hyung when he's doing important things."

Important things indeed, he thinks, as he continues scrolling through Facebook. He always feels like something isn't quite right, but at the same time, his life right now is aimless. He helps out with his friends' company but he doesn't actually do much, there's no—there's no purpose, nothing to live for, no one to live for.

He simply goes through the motions with something nagging in the back of his mind; walks in the park at night because he's a fucking sap who also happens to have trouble sleeping. Dropped his life half a decade ago to chase nothing around the world. Knows that he still loves music, has an affinity for it—he has the bravado to quit his job and leave the country, but not enough to go after what he wants, if he even knows what that is.

He shuts the laptop with a sigh and leans back into the chair, spinning around until he hits the wall and rolls back to the desk. Maybe he should take a nap, if he can even fall asleep. He can't have his shit together in real life, but at least he can avoid it.

One day, he goes to his dad's place for dinner. (He hesitates to call it his parents' place, not when they abruptly called off the wedding two months before the actual date. Not when the announcement sent a sharp pang of guilt into Taehyung's heart.) They'd moved up to Seoul a few years, and it wasn't like they didn't bother telling Taehyung, they really did try, but Taehyung was—Taehyung was stubborn. He still is, but he likes to think that it's not as bad.

"Kimchijigae," his dad says. Voice low and tight, the fact that they haven't seen each other in person for three years suffocating him. "Your favourite."

"Thanks, appa," Taehyung says. His voice is just as small. He digs into his bag and takes it out: a small figurine, carved from wood, one that he'd picked up from a roadside stall that he thought was special, until he walked five more minutes and realised every single stall sold the same thing. "Uh, here's something for you. From Bali."

"A sparrow?" His eyes light up, curious.

Then, from her seat beside Taehyung's dad, Yein comments, "It's cute."

His throat is tight. Yein doesn't look like Jeongguk, not really; she's too small, too bony, features too sharp. But they have the same eyes, large and round and sparkling, and it takes everything he has not to choke. Even after five years, the thought of the boy still makes his entire being hurt.

The rest of the dinner is a little awkward, but it's a start. He is back in Seoul and he will try his best. If not for himself, then for the people around him.

"Take care," Yein says. None of this is her fault, and yet here she is, trying to mend the cracks that Taehyung is too scared to fix. She grabs an umbrella from behind the door and passes it to him. "The roads are wet."

He nods and turns to leave, opening up the umbrella only to find that it's strangely familiar, a shade of blue that reminds him of home. It doesn't smell like home, not beneath the scent of rain hitting the pavement; but for all he knows, home no longer smells the same.

Home used to wield this very umbrella on rainy spring afternoons, a slice of toast in his mouth as he sprints for his morning classes; or on nights, when they wanted nothing more than to walk around and bask in each other's presence. But maybe home is no longer like that. Taehyung wouldn't know.

And if he tucks it away in a corner of the room when he gets back—out of sight, out of mind—he thinks he will allow himself this one small comfort.

At times, the days seem long; at times, they seem slow. But regardless, the nights trudge on by, and Taehyung is slowly but surely building his life again. He helps out with the music production side at Big Hit now, coming up with melodies, learning how to use Cubase by crashing Yoongi's late-night sessions in the studio and stealing his ramyeon even after all this time.

He finds his own place, too, sick of getting sexiled every other night;

it's small and cosy, just around the corner from the park. He still goes there, hikes up the hills whenever he can't sleep, but that's okay.

And, at the very least, he's not awkward around his father any more. It's not as if the events of last time have disappeared completely—they're still there, lingering in the background, something that no one can ever really forget—but the damage isn't as bad as it could have been. It's for the best, Taehyung guesses.

He goes back for dinner regularly now. Every Monday and Thursday, when he gets to leave a little earlier because the part-timer they've hired, the one who listens to Dean all the time and worships the ground Namjoon walks on, ends classes before six. He always misses Jeongguk by a hair's breadth—and it's a miracle, really, that he can even say the boy's name out loud without needing to hold on to something.

He catches glimpses of Jeongguk, stains that the boy leaves around the house in the form of an undone bed, an unwashed coffee cup. A Yonsei university jacket slung across the back of a chair, because the overachiever's too busy pursuing his Master's to do basic chores.

But Taehyung—he makes sure to leave no trace behind, because he can't bare the thought of giving any more of himself to Jeongguk, not when he's already given everything and had it all crumble to dust.

It's a Thursday. Bulgogi, this time, a change-up from the stews that his father always insists on cooking.

The air is tense. They'd gotten more relaxed with each other over the past months, but this time, it's as if they're back at square one, and Taehyung braces himself.

His father asks hesitantly, "Do you still talk to Jeongguk?"

"No."

Everything falls silent, and Yein stills from her position in the kitchen.

The reply is tentative, like treading on water. "You should."

That night, when he leaves, he does so in the quiet of dawn so that he doesn't have to deal with his dad or Yein. The one time he thinks everything is back to normal, and they drop a bomb on him. An ultimatum, almost. He hates it.

That night, when he leaves, he does so to a note stuck on his bedroom door, one that says *We're sorry* in tear-smudged script that he can barely decipher.

"We should have talked it out. Back then, we should have talked it out, instead of kicking you two out."

"I—I understand." He breathes. "I should have talked it out too. Leaving so suddenly was an impulsive decision."

"We're sorry, for not trying." Then a moment of hesitation, before the next few words strike where it hurts. "He misses you. And you miss him too."

"Don't say that." He can't breathe. "I'm sorry, too."

Jeongguk is—Jeongguk isn't really a fleeting memory. Taehyung hasn't seen him in person in years, but he is always there, leaving his dishes in the sink in his dad's place, or a slip of the tongue from Jimin. The boy is still close to the rest of his hyungs even if Taehyung is no longer a permanent fixture in his life. So it comes as no surprise that Jeongguk's presence occasionally makes itself known; the rest try their best to avoid mentioning Jeongguk, but Taehyung knows his friends better than they think.

Taehyung is, if anything, grateful for these small catches of infinity that seem to temporarily settle his heart. At least, he thinks, Jeongguk is doing well. That is all he can ask for.

But Taehyung knows that life is about moving on. Maybe he can never really settle, but he can still move. Time passes even if you don't pass with it.

So he will settle for this. This life, then, easy most of the time, but not always. The one with regular visits to his dad's place and stealing

Seokjin's earphones and crashing Hoseok's dance studio. The one where he gets to mentor the trainees and work on the group's debut track, or head to Hongdae on the weekends and busk. The one where he heads to the park every night—less so now, but still often—with a cigarette between his lips and thinks about what could have been, a lingering fondness in his chest.

He is sitting at the front desk of Big Hit when someone familiar walks in.

He looks different. He's taller, stronger, and he fills out his shirt in a way Taehyung never remembered him doing. His hair is pushed back. Taehyung can see his eyebrows for once, and he walks with an air of—not confidence, not really, but comfort, assurance.

"Yoongi-hyung!" he calls out, grinning. There it is, the same smile, doe eyes crinkling in the same way. He looks twenty again.

But when the boy sees who is sitting behind the desk, he stops. It almost seems like the world itself has stopped, too, like everything has stopped revolving just for them. Taehyung can feel his heart hammering and the biting cold of the reception is gone, replaced by a stark warmth that doesn't seem to go away.

All of a sudden, his oversized sweater is too thick. Everything is too warm. Too much.

Taehyung is the first to snap out of it. "I'm not Yoongi-hyung."

"No, you're not."

He breathes. This is going to be the first day of the rest of his life.

"Hi, my name is Kim Taehyung," he greets. He holds out a hand. It's callused from hours of busking in Hongdae and London and Tokyo and wherever else. "It's nice to meet you."

"I'm Jeon Jeongguk," Jeongguk replies. He bites his lip. Pauses. "It's great to meet you too." Taehyung thinks he's about to hightail it out of here, before Jeongguk blurts out, "Do you want to go out for coffee later?"

“Okay,” Taehyung smiles. Their gazes lock and this time, the world really has stopped. They’re just in a nondescript office but fuck it, this is his life now, and if it involves a grey office and bad coffee and Jeon Jeongguk, then he will take whatever he can. Baby steps. “I think we’ll be great friends.”

Taehyung’s heart is racing, but for the first time in a long time, it feels like it has settled.

“I think so too.”

sequel + author's notes

hi guys, first things first, the sequel is up [here](#)!

i've been mia for a really long time, at least on ao3, so some updates on stuff: i'm in my second year in uni, doing linguistics stuff, research stuff, dance + running stuff, so basically i'm just really busy all the time. that means i am much, much less involved in fandom (i can barely keep up nowadays tbh) and, consequently, in writing as well. i honestly haven't been able to write for a long while. it seems that the writing bug hits whenever i have no time though, so i hope you guys enjoy the sequel. more notes on the sequel at the fic itself.

wrt ktww, i honestly cannot believe how many people have read this and enjoyed it, and i know i'm absolute shit at replying to comments, but please know that i read every single one of them and each comment, bookmark, kudos—whatever it is, i appreciate every single one of them. you guys are some of the loveliest people.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!